Bhakti, Bells, and Bollywood

Positioning Kathak Dance as a Religious Ritual in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

The North Indian classical dance form of Kathak remains a prominent mode of artistic and cultural expression in the rapidly changing environments of urban India. As elements of the dance have been included in mediums of pop-culture, the traditional form and religious aspects have been maintained by practitioners in the midst of change. Kathak has inherent religious qualities and a rich cultural history intersecting with both Hindu and Muslim practices and ideologies. This dance form maintains it nature as a religious ritual relevant to a multiplicity of practitioners in the midst of significant historical changes and outside cultural influences through the balance of tradition and change in transmission. Examining the history and positioning of Kathak in religious thought and performance circles reveals the ritual relevancy for practitioners in urban settings. In the midst of change Kathak has not become an art form of the past or an entertainment driven dance form but fosters connections to culture, history, and spirituality providing practitioners with unique modes of engagement with art and transcendence.

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NOTE ON TERMS AND DIACRITICS

Kathak, having a multiplicity of cultural influences and a long history naturally incorporates several languages in its terminology and historical connections. The most prominent languages of Kathak are Hindi and Sanskrit with the presence of a few Arabic and Persian inspired words. For Sanskrit terms I have tried to stay to true to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration's use of diacritic markers. I have also utilized diacritic markers for the Hindi terms and other languages that reflect the pronunciation of the word rather than the more Anglicized spelling options.

Regarding the terms surrounding the caste of hereditary Kathak dancers *Kathaka* and *Kathak* are used interchangeably by many of my sources. To lessen confusion as much as possible, when referencing the dance form italics will not be used and references to the caste of dancers will be in italics. Likewise, when discussing *bhakti* and the Bhakti movement, *bhakti* in italics will be referencing devotion whereas Bhakti with no italics will refer to the historical movement or products of that tradition.

PREFACE

In scholarship of Kathak dance, many researchers come from within the tradition and are deeply aware of the nuances of this world of dance. Knowing this, I was hesitant as I entered this line of study. Yet the beauty of the dance and the constant questions surrounding its place in religious history and modern religious practice drew me deeper into the art form. Although I am not a Kathak dancer, I have trained in various forms of dance for over twenty years. Training with professional companies and studying dance at the collegiate level further enhanced my knowledge of the dance world and piqued my interest about dance scholarship, specifically the interactions between dance and religion. Researching Kathak was not something I envisioned upon entering graduate school, but over the course of time I have grown in admiration of the dance and I am constantly inspired by multiple research questions.

This thesis remains a preliminary study that opens even more doors of research. As a dancer, I am equipped with a knowledge base and connection to movement that helps me formulate questions as well as understand the experiential nature of artistic expression. Being an outsider to Kathak means more extensive research is needed to reach higher levels of proficiency, but it also equips me to ask questions from different angles and perspectives than insiders to the tradition. It was specifically my short Kathak training in Mumbai that furthered my curiosity and inspired this project. Coming from a background of dance training in predominantly classical ballet, modern, and tap, I jumped right into learning Kathak. In class, I was awed by the dancers' passion and dedication to a classical form that does not receive the same recognition as the growing contemporary and Bollywood dance scenes. This time of

training was short, but it sparked interests and questions and has continued to foster research and growth.

This thesis is a continuation of recent Kathak scholarship as well as an exploration into other streams of study. So far, Kathak has been predominantly studied through a historical and anthropological lens. Whereas, history and anthropology directly influence and are integral parts of religious studies, this thesis begins to position Kathak research more predominantly within the field of religion. This is but a launching ground for further research that will come from extended time in India and learning the dance form. As the sound of the bells in *riyāz* (ritual practice) call me to dance, so does the wealth of research questions call me to further study, using this work as a starting point and inspiration.

INTRODUCTION

Artistic expression and religion are rarely viewed as separate entities in Indian thought, but are constantly in communication with each other, influencing external expression of internal convictions. Therefore, the arts in India have been an integral part of religious rituals and expression throughout history. From visual art to the performing arts, devotion is prevalent in artistic expression and foundational in the evolution of the classical forms. This study goes beyond discussing the interconnectedness of the arts to religion developing a new method of viewing the dance form of Kathak as ritually relevant inside and outside traditional religious circles by examining its practice in urban India, its history, inherent religious qualities, and the balance of tradition and change that allow it to thrive in diverse religious settings and rapidly changing cultural environs.

Kathak is one of the codified classical dance forms of India. The folk and classical forms of India, like all performing arts, have evolved over time and remain in constant change as they respond to and negotiate with outside influences. There are many ways one could approach the study of Kathak and its connection to religious thoughts and practices. This study will examine specific elements of the dance form that have contributed to its positioning within religious history and how it is actively viewed, taught, and practiced in an urban setting. Some of Kathak's recent changes can be attributed to its migration into popular culture through Bollywood and other mediums. To many, the migration of Kathak into media is also a migration out of religious tradition. However, a closer examination reveals that Kathak, as it is being taught and practiced, is not separated from its religious history and qualities but is expanding its realm of influence to

practitioners of varying worldviews, thus becoming relevant ritualistically and artistically to a broader group of dancers and audiences.

Studying and defining ritual is a difficult task that must be contextualized. Ritual studies are not clearly defined and categorized by a system of theories or approaches. There are distinct angles from which rituals can be viewed—sociological, phenomenological, psychological, historical, and many others. It is undeniable that rituals, as commonly understood, exist in many areas of society. Yet, the "idea of ritual is itself a construction. . . a category or tool of analysis. . ."[1] Therefore when looking at the ritual theories of influential scholars such as Émile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade, and J.Z. Smith, it is important to realize why and how they were using this categorical tool in their studies. Constructing a complete and "correct" definition of ritual is impossible. Therefore, for this study and the positioning of Kathak as a religious ritual, a definition of ritual will be constructed by building on the ideas of theorists, addressing the fact that no definition is all encompassing of the nuances of ritual and devotional experience.

Ritual is a repeated act of expression by a group or individual that explores connection and communication with the sacred and a larger community. It fosters a position within a community, a set of traditions, and a system of values and worldviews, as well as a spiritual experience allowing "people to embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things."[2] While this definition is nowhere near complete, it serves as a platform from which Kathak can be further understood as a ritual in urban India. Inspired by this conception of ritual,

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[1] Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York, 2009. 51.

[2] Ibid., 2.

this understanding will be highlighted in the following chapters as the qualities of Kathak are further explicated.

In Chapter One, "The Story of the Storytellers," I look at how the construction of Kathak's history impacts how the dance has been viewed and practiced in recent decades. Extensive historical research of the dance reveals that the oral transmission of the tradition since the time of Indian independence and the years prior, has been constructed to paint a specific picture of the role and positioning of Kathak in Hinduism. Negating elements of cultural fusion and omitting significant parts of the dance's history brought a "reclamation and attendant gentrification of performing arts that distanced [the dancers] from their seemingly dissolute recent past, allowing them to become quintessential symbols of the new and ancient nation."[3] Kathak's history is one of controversy and contention, but despite the questions of its historical function in the temples and courts, the symbolic history is vital in understanding the role of oral traditions, artistic transmission in Kathak, and how this has brought the form to its current religious and artistic standing.

Chapter Two takes a different approach in understanding Kathak's religious connections by examining the form as a multifaceted religious experience. Beginning with a theoretical approach, the inherent religious qualities of the dance form, as it is connected to broader Indian philosophies and teachings, will be conducted, emulating a methodology of religious scholar Mircea Eliade. This section on theory will also note the need for practitioner perspectives because of the experiential nature of the dance. Upon establishing methods from which to study the dance's religious qualities, Kathak will be directly connected to both Hindu and Muslim

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[3] Walker, Margaret. "Revival and Reinvention in India's Kathak Dance." *MUSICultures* 37 (2010): 172.

practices and thoughts through an examination of devotion in the Bhakti tradition, the aesthetic theory of *rasa* (taste, flavor, essence), and Sufi *qawwalis* (devotional music and performance). This chapter concludes by continuing the point made in Chapter One, that Kathak is a syncretic religious practice that has been influenced by multiple religious traditions and continues to embrace multiplicity as it evolves.

The third chapter highlights the relevance of Kathak in the rapidly changing societies of urban India in the way it is taught, to whom it is taught, and how it has subtly adapted in choreography and performance. Kathak, although strictly codified, has the versatility to connect people to history, culture, philosophy, and religious ideas. Whether it is performed in temples or incorporated into popular media, it maintains a balance of tradition and change. The maintenance of tradition and adaptability is a result of the transmission of the dance within the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* (teacher-disciple tradition). This chapter will examine how the transmission has changed over the course of the dance's known history, crediting the importance of guru traditions throughout Indian practices. It will conclude by pointing to modern transmission methods and their active engagement in preserving a tradition while maintaining cultural, artistic, and religious relevancy in urban spheres.

Chapter Four concludes the discussion by examining themes of change in religious adherence in urban India and how the elements of Kathak, highlighted in this paper, position the dance as a religious ritual that is relevant to the wide demographic of its practitioners. Both tradition and change are vital elements in a thriving society, and Kathak as a performance art has the unique ability to respond to and communicate in a creative and relevant manner that provides dancer and audience alike with an experience of transcendence, devotion, and bliss.

Method and Sources

The bulk of this research is an examination and utilization of written materials such as scholarly books and articles. There is a wealth of information regarding the traditions and practices mentioned, and the research could have been conducted in a variety of ways. Faced with the predicament of choice, several elements of aesthetic theory and Hindu and Sufi rituals could have easily been expounded upon highlighting different nuances of Kathak. Considering the scope of this paper, distinct theories and practices were highlighted to best understand Kathak as relevant in current practice, leaving the other topics of interest for future study. Chapters one and two, specifically, are built upon scholarly materials and are heavily impacted by the works of two leading scholars of Kathak, visual anthropologist Pallabi Chakravorty and historian and ethnomusicologist Margaret Walker. Chakravorty and Walker have laid a strong foundation of critical research of Kathak. Their familiarity with the tradition and positioning as respected scholars provides unique perspectives and probing questions that have inspired much of my own research.

This research is enhanced by materials from religious studies, dance ethnography, anthropology, sociology, and history. As dance encompasses many aspects of a society, this paper attempts to give light to the different manners through which a performance art can be studied to provide a nuanced understanding. Therefore, practitioner accounts will be integral in understanding the *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) perspectives of Kathak. Alongside scholarly and practitioner writings, interviews and participant observation will be included. Many of the questions and thoughts that will be addressed stem from my own exposure to the dance form.

While in Mumbai for research purposes, I participated in Kathak classes and performances, conducting several interviews which have fostered research questions. Content associated with this field research will be minimal, yet influential, due to the scope of this paper and the need for more extensive time and research in India.

Kathak at a Glance

Kathak is one of the classical dance forms developed in Northern India. The word Kathak is derived from the Sanskrit term *kathakar,* which is most commonly translated as storyteller. Kathak as a dance conveys stories, most commonly from Hindu mythology. Known for the rhythmic foot movements and *chakkars* (pirouettes), Kathak conveys stories but also exhibits intelligent musicality and expression in the choreography. Similarities between Kathak, each of India's classical dance forms, and several folk dances can be drawn, yet each dance is musically and aesthetically distinct. Therefore, before diving into the core of the argument, it would be advantageous to paint a picture of Kathak by discussing the form, structure, and key elements that distinguish it as one of the classical dance forms of India.

It is important to note that it is impossible to neatly define and categorize the differences of classical and contemporary Kathak, due to the constant evolution of the dance as it is influenced by new ideas and choreographic structures. Kathak dancer and innovator Aditas Mangaldas comments on these categories; "traditional or contemporary… there has never been a contradiction of the two in my mind. I look at the ancient dance form of Kathak with a modern mind."[4] Her positioning is poignant in realizing that maintaining distinct categories is not

[4] Katrak, Ketu H. *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora*. Studies in International Performance. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 88.

necessary for relevant artistic expression. However, for the purpose of this discussion, classical Kathak and traditional choreography references the basic tenants and form of Kathak without including other dance or martial arts practices. Therefore, a Kathak performance that changes elements of costuming or staging, or gains inspiration from sources outside Bhakti poetry or Hindu mythology—but maintains form, structure, and overall purpose—will be considered classical. Contemporary Kathak works are becoming more popular across the globe, and this study considers those dance forms fusions of multiple styles of dance and art. Many of these contemporary forms use Kathak elements and even convey similar messages as the classical dance, but the structure has been altered significantly. While excellent art from both categories is emerging, this dialogue will focus on what is considered classical or more traditional and the changes arising in this sphere of the Indian dance world, leaving research on contemporary dance for another study.

Figure 1: Dancer in Mughal inspired costume

In a picture of a traditional Kathak performance, the viewer will see a solo dancer, male or female, with a string of bells (*ghungroo*) tied around each ankle, standing with a long spine and a relaxed yet dignified stance. Whether danced in a Rajput or Mughal style costume, or modern adaptations, the dancer will be adorned with rich colored fabrics and jewels. Accompanying the dancer will be a group of musicians. The *tabla* (hand drums) player, the most integral accompanist, will often be joined by a harmonium and a *sārangī* (short necked, stringed instrument) and occasionally other melodic and rhythmic instruments. The music and movement are

interconnected. Musicians and dancers interact with one another as if they were communicating throughout the performance. This traditional staging brings attention directly to the dancer and the movement.

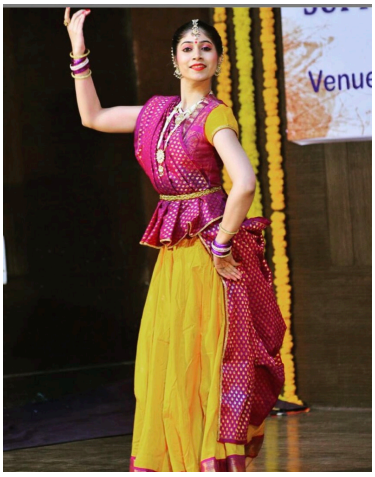

Figure 2: Bhakti Bhatwadekar in Rajasthani inspired costume

Kathak as a stage performance has undergone choreographic changes in recent years. With the inclusion of group work and artistic ingenuity some of the structure of the dance will occasionally take different forms, but each performance overall adheres to the codified movements and a sequence of distinct sections. The different *gharānās* (stylistic schools of Kathak), exhibit variations in this movement and structure, but the variants are few and basic structure is adhered to in the major schools. Within the structure there are two categories under which the other sections of the dance fall, the *nṛitta* (pure dance) and *nṛitya* (expression).[5]

The *nṛitta* is "dancing devoid of flavor," meaning these sections do not overtly express the emotions associated with storytelling or the aesthetic theory of *rasa* (which will be discussed in Chapter Two).[6] Rather than focusing on more theatrical portrayals, this category is known for the intricate, rhythmic footwork called the pure dance. The *nṛitya* category, on the other hand, is known for hand gestures and facial expressions that often convey a story, encompassing the qualities of specific characters. There are a few sections of a Kathak performance that are

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[5] Walker, Margaret E. *Kathak Dance: A Critical History*. (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2004), 9. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

[6] Lalli, Gina. "A North Indian Classical Dance Form: Lucknow Kathak." *Visual Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (2004): 25.

distinctly positioned in one category or the other, but several sections evidence qualities of both *nṛitta* and *nṛitya.*

The arrangement of the sections of a Kathak suite is determined by the dancer but generally begins with movement at the slower tempos and increases in speed and technicality throughout the performance. There is no sequential codification, but general frameworks are commonly accepted. Because of the communication between the musicians and dancers throughout a performance, there "is a physical logic to beginning slowly, but there is also a musical logic and cultural connection as vocal and instrumental performances follow a similar progression."[7]

Opening with the *vandana/ślōkam,* a Kathak performance is dedicated to a god(s) or goddess(es) through a salutation to the divine figure in a lyrical fashion, often in conjunction with a Sanskrit prayer. This section generally opens the performance and is followed by slower to medium pace rhythmic sequences such as the *chanchal*, *thāt*, and *āmad.* These sections gradually increase in tempo and provide a connection between the dancer and the musicians as they begin to experiment with various rhythms and tempos. This interplay is most evident in the *thāt* section, where an adept dancer might engage in improvisation responding to or influencing the music—often referred to as *savāl-javāb* (question-answer). In each of these sections the emphasis is not solely on the footwork, but the rhythm is also accompanied by *hastas/mudras,* (intricate hand gestures) and sweeping arm movements.

Greater rhythmic complexity is seen predominantly in the *paran/toda* (*tora*)*,* and *thaṭkār* sections. The rhythms of the dancer and accompanists are mathematically complex and rapid in

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[7] Walker, Margaret E. *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*. SOAS Musicology Series. 2014, 3.

Figure 3: *Ghungroos* (ankle bells)

tempo. These sections, while still accompanied by upper body movements, place emphasis on the footwork and accompanying *bols*. *Bols* are mnemonic syllables used by dancers and musicians in composition and memorization. Often spoken aloud in sections of a performance and in the learning process, *bols* are a foundational element of Kathak and classical music, and are influential in the choreography and rhythmic complexity seen throughout the dance. The use of *bols* can, at times, also be seen in the *nṛitya* sections.

The *nṛitya* section of a Kathak performance include the *kavita* and *gat/gat-bhāv.* Each of these, and accompanying *nṛitya* sections, emphasizes the use of mimetic gestures, *hastas*, and facial expressions while conveying a story or poem. Still actively engaged in the rhythmic nature of the dance, these sections are more emotive and are influenced directly by both oral and written traditions. The *kavita* combines the footwork with mimetic choreography as the drum beats correspond with the words of a poem, while the *gat bhāv* depicts a story from popular mythology or one of the famous epics.[8] These sections are often referred to as the *abhinaya* (storytelling) section of the performance. This section will be integral in understanding Kathak's positioning within religious history and practice.

Recent choreographic changes to traditional Kathak include more group-based works, different music, the use of a variety of poetry and religious texts in different languages and more, although structure and movement remain consistent. Within this sphere of artistic change there

[8] Lalli, "A North Indian Classical Dance Form," 35–36.

remains an emphasis on the religious and philosophical. The most common stories portrayed remain that of *Rādhā* and *Kṛṣṇa* but other religious texts and stories are receiving more light in performance circles. By using various mythologies and poetry from multiple traditions and languages as inspiration, Kathak choreographers are learning how to appeal to a broader demographic that might not be familiar with the language of dance or specifics of Hindu mythology. This process incorporates the public in what used to be esoteric knowledge for the elite and uses a combination of that knowledge and common knowledge to forge vital religious and philosophical connections. This brief glance at the structure and purpose of the dance form will ultimately aid in understanding its role as a classical art.

Putting the movement of a Kathak performance in words is difficult, as the written medium can not express the visual contrast of the fluidity of movement and the staccato rhythms of the footwork. This contrast is representative of the positioning of this classical dance form in the rapidly changing and globalizing urban India. What allows this juxtaposition to be relevant to performers and audiences will be outlined in this study by discussing various elements of Kathak that contribute to and influence its religious nature and its current balance of tradition and change in practice.

CHAPTER ONE

The Story of the Storytellers: A Brief Examination of the Story and History of Kathak

Literal portrayals of stories and mythologies are often integral elements of a performance, yet the movements themselves tell a story of cultural sharing and the evolution of ideas and beliefs in conjunction with artistic expression. Kathak along with depicting mythology, tells a story about the relationship of religion, history, and the arts, giving insight into modern understandings of tradition and ritual. Researching the history of Kathak and asking difficult questions of origin and tradition reveal nuances of the evolution of choreography, religious connections, and practitioner involvement. Historical research is a product of its own time and culture. "The writing of history is an ongoing process of cultural (re)construction, but in post-colonial nations like India, it is simultaneously research into a reclamation of identity in the wake of occupation."[9] Current research is revealing that the retelling of Kathak's history is a form of reclamation, with an emphasis on upholding and transmitting tradition, specifically tied to Hindu religious rituals. Understanding the commonly accepted history, with critical examination, highlights the role of the dance as a proponent of ritual and tradition in the religious and culture milieu of urban India.

The study of Kathak has expanded in recent years, and influential research can now be found in anthropology, dance ethnography, and history. Margaret Walker, ethnomusicologist and historian, and Pallabi Chakravorty, dance and visual anthropologist, are the leaders in questioning the history and current positioning of Kathak. Their perspectives and questions will be examined alongside the commonly accepted history of the dance form in the following

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[9] Walker, Margaret. "Kathak Log Ya Kathak Nṛtya: The Search for a Dance Called Kathak." *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society* 40 (2009): 1.

discussion of the major turning points and influences in Kathak's evolution. Beginning with the potential temple origins and progressing to Kathak's incorporation into pop-culture and media, the dance form's historically religious connections will be discussed, revealing the importance of tradition and ritual in current portrayals of the art form.

From the Temples to the Stage

The story of Kathak begins with devotional dancers in the temples of Vedic India. The temple origins are often supported by in-depth analysis of ancient temple art. Shovana Narayan, a leading Kathak performer and teacher, claims that "the existence of a full-fledged dance right from 900 BC in the region of the Indus-Gangetic belt cannot be denied."[10] She continues to support this claim by describing the body stances and hand gestures of various statues, connecting them to movement in modern Kathak performances.[11] Claiming that dance was an integral part of the religious landscape of India is not far-fetched, considering dance is a natural expression of worship and ritual throughout the cultures of the world. The lack of contextual information surrounding the art makes it difficult to draw connections between

Figure 4: Image of 2nd century BCE dancing *Apsarases* used by Ranjana Srivastava in claiming Kathak's ancient origins

[10] Narayan, Shovana. *Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections: Kathak* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 1998), 28.

[11] Ranjana Srivastava is likewise known for using ancient sculptures in claiming Kathak as an ancient temple dance in her books *Tantra, Mantra, and Yantra in Dance* and *Kathaka: The Tradition, Fusion, and Diffusion.*

Kathak of the twenty-first century to temple dance of ancient times. Kathak may or may not be connected to Vedic and Hindu temple worship, but what is important is that the dance practice known as Kathak today is a modern creation that draws inspiration from the religious history of the land, creating a labyrinth of cultural expression rather than a linear religious historical connection.

Few researchers attempt to connect Kathak to sculptures and art of ancient times. The lack of information surrounding the temple art, and the unknown time when dance emerged in formalized religious rituals deters many from broaching this branch of study. After glossing over the potential origins, the commonly told histories of Kathak associate the dance to a caste of Brahman storytellers known as *Kathakas* using select verses in the *Mahābhārata* to support the connection:

> The 'Kathakas' of the *Mahābharāta* were a special group of story-telling brahmins, establishing identifying ties with the Kathak tradition of our day. In a passage in the *Arjunavanvasa* section of the *Ādiparva* in the *Mahābhārata* there is an indirect reference to the art practiced by the Kathaks…*(Arjun, on his departure for the forest, was accompanied by an entourage of Kathaks and forest dwelling ascetics and brahmins who recited sweetly the divine tales).*[12]

The above selection is one example of how slight references in sacred texts are used to explain an ancient history of *Kathakas* and their preservation of a dance called Kathak. The *Mahābhārata* is not a book about dance and theater, but a poetic epic that has deeply influenced and inspired the arts in India for centuries. Within the epic there are a few mentions of *Kathakas,*

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[12] Narayan, *Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections*, 8–9.

commonly translated as storytellers. It is through etymology of this word that the depiction of a pure lineage of a caste of Kathak dancers is drawn. Kathak is derived from terms such as *kathaka*, *kathakar*, and *kathavacak*.[13] "It is these terms that are evoked most strenuously in a view to locating Kathak dance in the distant past, as choreographic links are more fleeting."[14]

It is a commonly held belief that the lineage of Kathak dancers can be traced to these bards of ancient times, yet recent textual analysis and historical research uncovers gaps in the presented historical and literary record. The portrayal of mythology in creative ways has been carried down through the ages. However Walker points out that the existence of *kathak log,* a people and caste of *Kathakas,* is not supported, and this version of history was constructed in recent times.[15] Likewise, there is no evidence to support the dance form as a method of the ancient *Kathakas'* story telling. The search for these ancient origins and attempts to connect Kathak aesthetically to ancient art, and in function to *Kathakas,* reveals the importance of the dance tradition in the religious spheres of modern India. Throughout the commonly accepted and critically examined history of the dance, religion has played a key part in Kathak's evolution, resulting in a unique interplay with current religious thoughts and rituals. Much of this interplay took place in times of significant political and cultural changes.

There is evidence of Kathak's existence prior to the changes brought by the Mughal rule, although the details are sparse. It is seen in the records of both the Muslim and Hindu courts of Northern India that Kathak, as it is known today, began to take shape choreographically and

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[13] *Kathaka,* and *Kathak* are often interchanged when discussing the caste of hereditary dancers. *Kathakar* is found in predominantly Sanskrit documents referencing a group of story-tellers and *kathavacak* is a theatrical folk performance of Northern India.

[14] Walker, "Kathak Log Ya Kathak Nrtya," 169.

[15] Log (लोग) is Hindi for people and/or group of people.

musically. Many claim that the devotional dancers of Hindu temples changed elements of the dance form in order to please the new Muslim patrons.[16] Some practitioners go as far as saying that the dance forms influenced by Muslim rule regressed and did not regain their splendor until the twentieth century cultural renaissance.[17] In an attempt to emphasize the religious and devotional nature, many teachers claim that Kathak was withdrawn into the temples outside of society's view during the Mughal period, although there is no concrete support for this claim. None of these arguments account for the amalgam of movement and music that was a result of the Mughal courts and their patronage of the arts. Hindustani (classical) music as taught today, has its origins in the interplay of Muslim and Hindu cultures. Likewise, Kathak was influenced by cross-cultural, syncretic creation. This evolution does not negate the devotional elements of the dance historically or in the modern age, rather it adds a nuance of religious diversity and expression.

With the advent of Muslim rule also came the rise of Sufism and the artistic expressions intricately tied to this "mystical" expression of Islam. All of these events occurred alongside the rise of the devotional tradition known as the Bhakti movement. These historical movements provided a platform for creation and artistic development. Hindu art and dance were undeniably present in ancient times, but it was with the rise of *bhakti* devotion, in conjunction with Muslim influences that these forms of religious expression received technical codification. According to Chakravorty, "Muslim royalty did not change the basic aesthetic concepts associated with Hindu ritual practices of music and dance such as *rasa* (aesthetic theory of the taste and essence of art),

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[16] Walker, *Kathak Dance*, 174.

[17] Narayan, *Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections,* 49-50.

bhāva (performed emotions) and *darśan* (gaze), but secularized them and added technical complexity…. The syncretic tradition of Sufi-Bhakti philosophy fund a sophisticated expression in the dance that emerged in the royal courts."[18]

The cross-cultural influences explain the composition of a Kathak performance and the presence of strict rhythmic structures in conjunction with the use of *hastas* (hand gestures) and the presence of *rasa* (aesthetic theory of taste), specifically in the *abhinaya* (story-telling) section of a performance. Aesthetic and musical exchange was not the only contribution of Muslim-Hindu interactions to Kathak; philosophy and religious practices were also a part of this conglomeration of culture.

Figure 5: *Tripataka*

There are several reasons people within the Kathak tradition negate the influence of Muslim court dancers, known as courtesans or *tawaifs,* in the evolution of the dance form. In the post-colonial construction of Kathak's history, transmitters of the tradition often ignore that "it was the courtesans along with other professionals of the court who were largely responsible for the presentation of the form until its advent on the modern stage."[19] Instead of discussing the influence and contribution of the courtesans to the preservation of Kathak, male gurus associated with the claimed caste of *Kathaka*s are credited with the preservation of the art. Margaret Walker has contributed immensely to researching the existence of this Kathak caste throughout history. Her research has revealed a lack of evidence supporting the claim that the *Kathakas* are an

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[18] Chakravorty, Pallabi. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 37.

[19] Clark, Lori. *Kathak in Hindi Films*, (MA thesis, American University, 1997). 73. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

ancient caste of hereditary dancers, leading her to critically re-examine the history of the dance, claiming that the *Kathaka* caste is a more recent (re)-creation in the nineteenth century.

The emphasis on the male guru lineage has also inspired research regarding gender and Kathak, uncovering the importance of the courtesans to the choreographic and artistic evolution of the dance, despite the negative reputation so commonly attributed to these performers. The negative portrayal of the courtesans is multifaceted and intersects with discussions of politics, religion, and ideas of ethics/morality. It is common knowledge that the relationship between Muslims and Hindus has been an ongoing discourse of disagreements and political and religious turmoil, yet this only encompasses one side of the Hindu-Muslim dialogue. Therefore, the effort to connect Kathak solely to Hindu origins has led many to overlook and undermine the artistic influence of the dancers and musicians of the Muslim courts.

Discussing the impact of Muslim musicians and artists on the aesthetics and technique of Kathak would also require admitting to the influence of Islamic principles and/or practices on the dance because of the intricate ties of religion and art in South Asian thought. Although this discussion is changing and being re-evaluated in modern teachings, the negation of Muslim influence is a cornerstone in the retelling of Kathak's history. The negative reputation of these court dancers and other artists was present before the advent of British rule, but it was the colonizers who propagated the notion that all dancers were of loose morals and virtue.

Under British rule, the courtesans became known as *nautch* dancers and were most commonly associated with prostitution. From the British residents' limited perspectives and knowledge of the art, the dances of India were nothing more than erotic displays.[20] Whereas

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[20] Walker, *Kathak Dance*, 38–39.

eroticism plays a role in the presence of *śṛṅgārarasa* (*rasa* depicting erotic, sensual love) in Kathak, few of the British were able to see past this element to uncover the other nuances of the art form.[21] Over time the British depiction of dancers became the impetus for negating the importance of the role of female dancers in the Mughal courts and subsequent time frames. Mohan Khokar in *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance* positively perpetuates the role of male guru*s* by portraying the negatives of eroticism of the women who came to be known as *nautch-walis. "*Eventually, the dance of the *nautch* girl came to be associated with voluptuousness and lasciviousness, and the dancers came to be categorized as women of easy virtue.[22]

Nautch is a term that was used by the British for the majority of dance forms throughout the subcontinent. This term is derived from the Sanskrit terms *nṛitta* and *nṛitya* (dance) and overtime it developed a negative connotation as a result of British and Hindu social reform movements. "North Indian *nautch*, which evolved from the royal courts of the Mughals and Rajputs from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and later in the music rooms of the Bengali *zamindars* (landlords), became associated with low culture and women of loose morals towards the turn of the [nineteenth] century."[23] Initially, the dancers were well-trained women of higher status (many of whom were Muslim), but over time their reputation shifted from the high status of the courts to that of prostitutes. This shift can be attributed to the "anti-*nautch*" movement. Much of the focus of the "anti-*nautch*" movement was directed towards banning the

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[21] *Śṛṅgārarasa* is within the broader doctrine of *rasa* in Indian aesthetic thought and will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

[22] Khokar, Mohan. *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance*. 2nd Rev. and Enl. ed. India Library. New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1984. 134.

[23] Chakravorty, Pallabi. "Dancing into Modernity: Multiple Narratives of India's Kathak Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1/2, 2006. 117.

devidāsi system of temple dancers in South India. The North Indian dance forms, including Kathak, were recipients of the negativity that was a result of both British religious ideology and Hindu reform movements, such as the *Brahmo Samaj*.

Kathak dancers, despite the stigma surrounding them, continued to pursue and perfect their art in the homes of patrons for specific festivals and parties. The performances of the Mughal courts and those conducted in patron's homes, kept the dance form alive through the course of political changes. According to Khokar and Chakravorty the majority of Kathak dancers at this pivotal point in the dance's history were Muslims.[24] Although the form of Kathak at this time was a conglomerate of Hindu and Muslim religious ideas and artistic expression, the negative reputation of *nautch* came in conjunction with the majority of the artists coming from a Muslim background. This resulted in a negative portrayal or omission of the *nautch-walis* as well as Muslim contributions to Kathak in post-colonial reiterations of the history.

The reclamation of Kathak began with the emergence of the dance form as an acceptable cultural ritual amongst the Hindu upper and middle classes. To become acceptable, Kathak had to be associated with positive Hindu rituals, values, and teachings. Dancer, and choreographer, Madame Menaka propelled the internationalization of Kathak as well as its growth in Indian society. Menaka selected students from middle class families rather than employing professional dancers who had the reputation of *nautch walis.* This selectivity "not only made it [Kathak] acceptable amongst the emergent middle classes during this time [1930s], but elevated dance in general from a mere virtuoso technique to art…"[25] The change in performers with the influence

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[24] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 31.

[25] Chakravorty, "Dancing into Modernity" 118.

Figure 6: Madame Menaka

of dance pioneers such as Menaka, Ruth St. Denis, and ballerina Anna Pavlova allowed society to view Kathak as a high-art rather than erotic expression, although much of the movement vocabulary remained consistent. It was the reformulation of the history of Kathak, emphasizing a male Brahminical lineage, that thoroughly changed society's view of the dance thereby increasing acceptability amongst the religious elite of North India and society as a whole.[26]

In recent years, the historicity of an ancient caste of Brahman *Kathakas* has undergone intense research and questioning. As mentioned earlier, despite the historical inaccuracy of an ancient caste of storytellers, the connection to the religious elite has become a part of Kathak's story and directly affects its current transmission and cultural relevance. This aspect of the Kathak tradition became more widely disseminated with a nation-wide artistic renaissance of Indian classical art in post-colonial India. Whether historically accurate or not, the teaching of an ancient Brahmanical connection has furthered the transmission of the dance, resulting in families of *Kathakas* developing dance schools for hereditary and non-hereditary dancers. What we know as Kathak "is largely credited to the performing artists and gurus who are members of hereditary families of dancers who call themselves Kathaks."[27]

The hereditary connection came in conjunction with the artistic renaissance. In order to raise Kathak to classical status it had to be disassociated with the reputation surrounding the *nautch*. Dance was at the center of this artistic revival that "was shaped by the nationalist

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[26] Leila Sokhey, better known as Madame Menaka, brought Kathak to the international stage alongside the works of Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and modern dance pioneers Ruth St. Dennis and Ted Shawn.

[27] Walker, *Kathak Dance*, 14.

imagination of a 'pure' and 'sacred' tradition."[28] While Madame Menaka influenced the changing views of Kathak dramatically, her artistry and publicity were only one element that projected Kathak as a cherished, ancient, cultural art form.

What sealed Kathak's positioning as a classical art was the emphasis on the male *gurukul* (male teaching lineage) the most famous being the Maharaj family of the Lucknow *gharānā* (school and style of Kathak). The presence of a traditional *guru-śiṣya* style of transmission validated the dance as part of an ancient religious history as well as separated it from its "debauched" history of the courts and as seductive entertainment art. "Identifying an untainted devotional and male past for North Indian dance allowed Kathak to be adopted, along with other dances like Bharatanatyam and the classical music 'rediscovered' by scholars… as part of a cultural heritage worthy of the newly independent India."[29]

. The emphasis on a caste of *Kathakas*, a Hindu devotional history, and a male-centric *gurukul* allowed Kathak's acceptance as a classical dance by society as well as by the government. It was not long after scholars connected Kathak to texts such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Mahābhārata* and traditional lineages that the national government became the main patron of the art, resulting in the emergence of centralized institutions of learning in the mid-twentieth century, such as the Kathak Kendra within the Sangeet Natak Academy.[30] Becoming a classical art form, supported by the government in a time of growing national pride, resulted in a dramatic increase in Kathak's popularity.

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[28] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 48.

[29] Walker, *Kathak Dance*, 15–21.

[30] Chakravorty, "Dancing into Modernity," 38.

The accessibility of Kathak to the middle class was furthered by state-sponsored television networks that disseminated Indian cultural arts to the masses. Kathak, along with the other classical dance styles of India, was included in many of the cultural promotions and educational shows of *Doordarshan* (national television).[31] The initial goal was to display Kathak as something other than *nautch*, emphasizing its devotional history. Initially, television served this goal effectively, but over time Kathak was naturally influenced by the growing entertainment industry in India. Performances today often depict the sharing of artistic ideas and expressions between classical art and pop-culture.

Before discussing the prevalence of Kathak in Hindi films, Pallabi Chakravorty notes the rapid changes India has undergone in recent years and how it is a balance of the new market economy with traditions. "It exhibits the characteristics of postmodernity seen in the advanced capitalist world where the national space is represented by various transnational collectives and diverse cultural forms."[32] Kathak has been directly affected by postmodern changes, yet it balances the change with a maintenance and teaching of cultural heritage. The rise of the entertainment industry, specifically, has popularized Kathak. It has also caused the dance form to adjust to the changing environment, audience, and performers, adding more variety to its cultural makeup.

Bollywood is one of the most widely known elements of Indian culture in the west. Known for the melodrama, vibrant colors, and energetic song and dance scenes, Bollywood films have audiences all over the world. One of the many elements that makes Bollywood distinct

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[31] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 73.

[32] Ibid., 74.

from other musicals is the melding of popular culture and tradition, often most evident in the song and dance scenes. Kathak is one of the dance forms that heavily influenced this type of choreography.

Figure 7: Kathak inspired scene from Bollywood film *Devdas* (2002)

Before the emergence of Kathak as a classical dance, several dancers such as Gauhar Jan, Janaki Bai, Siddeswari Devi and many others, migrated to jobs of singing and acting due to the negative reputation surrounding *nautch*. As dance grew in acceptability, its presence in the film industry also increased. Having former dancers already engaged in acting resulted in the incorporation of Kathak and other traditional dance elements into film. The desire of filmmakers to promote indigenous art, along with the presence of the dancers in the industry, allowed for the seamless melding of traditional elements and pop-culture. "Several early filmmakers argued that the ubiquitous presence of song and dance in Bombay films was a vehicle for indigenous self-expression, so as to keep the cultural forces of foreign influences at bay."[33]

The presence of Kathak, specifically, in the film industry can be accredited to several people as well as the structure of the dance itself. As noted, many *nautch* dancers were influential in the burgeoning entertainment industry throughout India. Kathak's migration to Bombay, the center of Bollywood and film, can be credited in part to Madame Menaka and her far-reaching

[33] Chakravorty, Pallabi. *This Is How We Dance Now! Performance in the Age of Bollywood and Reality Shows* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 65.

influence. Being the hub of entertainment careers, Bombay also attracted many artists searching for jobs, especially since court patronage of the arts was no longer a feasible means of keeping music and dance alive. This fostered the growth of both the classical arts and their incorporation into the film industry, thereby increasing the popularity of classical dance.

Kathak found a place in film and the growing arts scene in Bombay. Unlike Bharatanatyam and other classical dance forms, Kathak's cultural influences give a fluidity of movement that naturally blended with the changing aesthetics. Many aspiring actresses found themselves in traditional Kathak classes in order to build a foundation in dance training that would serve them on the screen. The way Kathak has been incorporated into film is part of new dance genres that fuse classical movements with other styles. "This form celebrated hybridity rather than the narratives of purity and nationhood associated with the revival of classical Indian dances."[34]

This hybrid of dance, although prominent, is only one way Kathak movements and aesthetics is kept alive. Maintaining the "pure form" is of utmost importance for many classically trained dancers who view the fusion of dance styles as something intolerable. Veteran Kathak dancer and teacher Bela Arnab, in an interview conducted by Chakravorty, comments strongly on the changes brought to some spheres of Kathak education and performance saying, "I am very much against the new trends in Kathak dance… I cannot tolerate what is going on in the name of Kathak. I will not change the dance my guru taught me."[35]

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[34] Chakravorty, *This Is How We Dance Now!*, 65.

[35] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 131.

The evolution of Kathak has naturally responded to the changes in entertainment, communication, and ideologies prevalent in India. The ramifications of these changes on the religious elements of the dance form will be discussed more in depth in chapters three and four, but in this brief examination of the history of Kathak it is important to note its presence in pop-culture. From educational television shows to popular Hindi films, Kathak has been steadily adapting as it responds to the changing cultures around it.

Currently, Kathak exemplifies a mixture of tradition and change. From the schools that teach and preach the importance of "pure" Kathak, to the fusion dances of YouTube sensation Kumar Sharma, elements of the dance's history can be seen in each performance. Kathak's history is a labyrinth of change and cultural influences, yet ritualistic and religious elements can be traced through the entirety. The relevance of the dance form in both religious and artistic circles is not due to a monolithic religious history, but can be attributed to the diversity and ability of art to balance tradition and change in a way that makes cultural shifts palatable and enjoyable for the people. From the temples to the television, Kathak communicates culture and religion. Even when separated from religious spheres or teachings, Kathak is not secularized entirely but remains a devotional art that invites practitioners and audiences alike into a spiritual experience.

CHAPTER TWO

Theory, Teachings, and Devotion: Kathak as a Multifaceted Religious Experience

The story of Kathak is filled with various cultural and religious ideas and expressions. This chapter will examine Kathak from a different angle, looking at its connections to religion through theory, teachings, and practices. The first section explains how Kathak inherently maintains religious expression by taking an archetypal theoretical approach. This method is followed by looking at Kathak's connections to South Asian Hinduism and Sufism through teachings, ideas, and practice. Although introductory, this chapter will provide a foundation of knowledge that begets a more thorough understanding of the religious elements and history of Kathak. By acknowledging ties between the art form and various schools of thought, the relevance of the dance as a ritual in the rapidly changing environment of urban India will be better understood.

A Theoretical Approach: Kathak and *Axis Mundi*

To understand an art form's connection to religious practice, a theoretical approach can be used to uncover nuances that would not be gleaned through historical or aesthetic approaches alone. This process will be utilized to reveal religious qualities of the dance form that will ultimately aid in understanding practitioner perspectives as well as the embodiment of religious teachings and ideas in Kathak. For a preliminary understanding of how a theoretical approach provides deeper understanding of Kathak, Mircea Eliade's theory of *axis mundi* will be applied to Kathak dance. Although under scrutiny and criticism, Eliade's archetypal, religious theories have inspired research in comparative studies of religion, philosophy, and more. The theories of

this influential historian of religion, author, and artist have been emulated by many in interpreting religious rituals and art. [36]

Axis Mundi is a complex concept of symbolism used by Eliade to portray the theme of heaven and earth connecting—providing a path of communication between people and the Divine. Symbolically, *axis mundi* is a place where the sacred enters the profane while maintaining a transcendent quality. Often used in the interpretation of religious art and architecture, *axis mundi,* is not limited to geographically fixed locations but can be used to explain mobile sacral items such as holy relics (i.e., the Ark of the Covenant, relics of the Buddha, etc.) or even a particular person.

Arthur Green connects Eliade's theory of *axis mundi* to the *ẓaddiq,* a holy man, as described in mystical writings of later Judaism. Through detailed exegesis of religious texts and by providing alternate interpretations of Jewish sacred spaces, Green explains how "the *ẓaddiq* has indeed become the *axis mundi*, here in a unique blending of sacral persona and real person; he is the great tree who in an entirely new way unites the three-tiered cosmos in his own person."[37] Similarly to how Green distinguishes the *ẓaddiq* as an *axis mundi,* an interpretation of Kathak will show how a Kathak dancer has the potential to function in the same role. Utilizing the theory in this manner does not contradict Eliade's methodology rather reflects his implementation of archetypal theories over a broad range of cultural and religious traditions.

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[36] Eliade's explication of *axis mundi* in an English translation of *Patterns in Comparative Religion* and other essays, serve as the base understanding of this theory.

[37] Green, Arthur. "The Ẓaddiq as Axis Mundi in Later Judaism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 3 (1977): 342. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1463144. Green's article is a strong example of the breadth of possibilities in applying Eliade's theories to religious phenomena. Further extrapolation of Green's use of axis mundi is beyond the scope of this paper.

Eliade utilized several themes to distinguish a monument as an *axis mundi.* Consecration, demarcating sacred space or elements, is noted as the first step in the construction of an *axis mundi.* The structure is not the indicator of the sacred; it is the manifestation of the *hierophany* (modality of the sacred) and the subsequent consecration of space that suggests the sacred's presence. Consecration, performed in a variety of ways, is necessary because of the relationship between the sacred and profane. Dance performed by an imperfect and finite human body expresses the paradoxical dialectic of the sacred and profane. The profane body in Kathak most often expresses and embodies stories and characteristics of Hindu deities. "What is paradoxical is that something profane, ordinary, limited, imperfect, finite, historical, while remaining a natural thing, can at the same time manifest that which is sacred, extraordinary, perfect, infinite, transhistorical."[38]

Kathak dance is consecrated in multiple ways; the space, the movement, and even elements of the costuming are dedicated and set apart from their daily profane routine for the purpose of invoking and portraying the Divine. Ranjana Srivastava, a performer and scholar of Kathak, depicts the sacred nature of the dance claiming that when performed it is a ritual that extends beyond daily activities. "The art becomes instrumental to, or a medium to unravel the secrets of nature to understand the cosmic relationships… This is the truth, the essence of Kathak as a dance form from man to divinity."[39]

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[38] Allen, Douglas. "Phenomenological Method and the Dialectic of the Sacred." In *Imagination & Meaning,* eds. Norman J. Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1982), 78.

[39] Srivastava, Ranjana. *Tantra Mantra Yantra in Dance: An Exposition of Kathaka* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2004), 69.

Upon establishing the space, monument, or person as a consecrated entity, Eliade discusses the "labyrinth" surrounding the center—the point of connection and communication with the Divine. Accessing the "center" is traditionally not an easy accomplishment. That which is at the center "is closely guarded and to get to [the center] is the equivalent to an initiation, a 'heroic' or 'mystical' conquest of immortality."[40] In Kathak, this labyrinth is depicted in the learning process as well as in the dedication and meditation required of the performer. The idea of "labyrinth" as an initiation process, according to Eliade's examples, requires the initiate to surrender and be dedicated to the challenges and trials of reaching the Divine—reaching the "center."

In the study of Kathak the dancer is required to surrender to the art form as well as to the teacher. A depiction of sacrality is seen in the*, guru-śiṣya paramparā* the relationship between the guru and student, which will be discussed further in Chapter Three. The "model of the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* was meant to preserve the very 'essence' of the art form as pristine and uncorrupted by outside influences as it got transmitted from one generation to the next."[41] The dedication of the dancer to the art form and the guru, in conjunction with the consecration of space, are two elements that reveal themes of *axis-mundi* in a Kathak dancer, yet it is in the yogic elements of the dance where Kathak can be seen as the point of connection to the Divine.

Kathak resembles the more physically centered practices of *haṭha yoga* in the use of *prāṇāyāma* (controlled breathing) and *āsanas* (body positions). The positioning of the body in Kathak reflects various schools of Tantric yogic thought and is an example of the "cosmic pillar"

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[40] Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York, NY: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 382.

[41] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 139.

used by Eliade in his description of *axis mundi.* According to Eliade the cosmic pillar is the symbolic center of the universe that depicts the joining of heaven and earth. Reaching the cosmic pillar results in a height of spirituality. The ascent is physically and spiritually difficult. The imagery is that of energy rising as a result of the deep meditation and intention of the practitioner. An ascension of energy from bottom to top is noted in a Kathak performance connecting the dance to the alignment of one's *cakras* in meditation, a concept within various schools of Indian religious and philosophical thought.

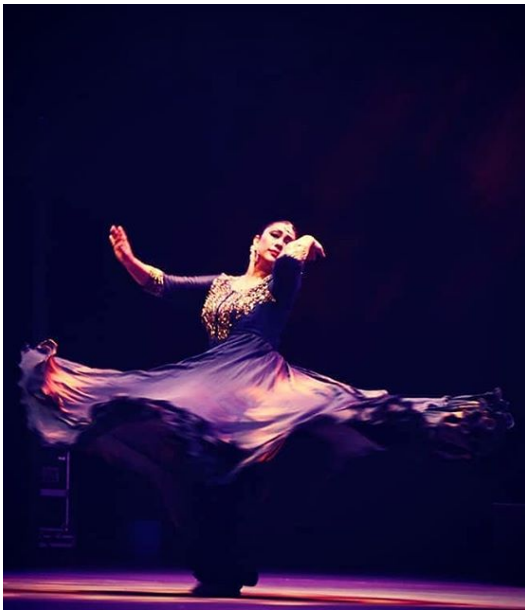

Figure 8: Kathak dancer completing a *chakkar* maintaining a vertical spine .

According to Shovana Narayan, one of the hallmarks of Kathak is the appearance of the spine as a vertical axis on which the dancer turns.[42] The trademark position of the spine in Kathak is one example of the influence of yogic and Tantric practices on the development and philosophy of the art form. Although the explanation of *cakras* in this study is significantly limited, a common conception of *cakras,* as seen in yogic practices, illustrates their presence in Kathak as a cosmic pillar. "*Cakras* are viewed as 'a series of wheels or centers of spiritual energy spaced along the vertical axis of the subtle body.… The aim of the *haṭha-yogic* practice is for the individual's *śakti* (power which is dormant in the root *cakra)* to ascend from *cakra* to *cakra* until it merges with the unlimited

[42] Narayan, *Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections*, 29, 46−47.

power… in blissful liberation."[43] In both yoga and Kathak, the practitioner visualizes the location of each *cakra* and, through meditative concentration, imagines the power emanating from the root *cakra* (*mūlādhāra*) successively through each energy center. Imagining the movement of energy guides meditation and the practitioner's body while meditating resembles a pillar that connects the profane with the sacred.

The imagined cosmic pillar is one of several qualities that constitutes a Kathak dancer as an *axis mundi.* The intention and devotion of the practitioner distinguishes the art form as a point of connection with the Divine, allowing Kathak to be viewed as a religious ritual. The maintenance of spirituality in the art form is due to the fact that it is often viewed as a religious practice and offering.[44] Kathak as an act of *sādhana* (in the most simple definition, a spiritual practice of surrender and devotion) requires a specific intentionality of the performer that differs dramatically from many entertainment arts. The dancer is required to be devoted to the art in the earliest stages of the learning process by surrendering to the guru, and by surrendering mind, body and spirit in a performance. The dancer aspires to achieve the "Absolute" through devotion in pursuit of the Divine through liberation (*mokṣa*) in practice.[45] The required intentionality of the dancer in maintaining the dance as a religious art indicates the choice of the individual in allowing the presence of the *hierophany.* Eliade distinguished "that a *hierophany* implies a choice, a clear cut separation, the thing which manifests the sacred from everything around

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[43] Johnson, W. J. *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), http:// www.oxfordreference.com.eres.library.manoa.hawaii.edu /view/10.1093/acref/9780198610250.001.0001/acref-9780198610250.

[44] Narayan, *Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections*, 18.

[45] Srivastava, *Tantra Mantra Yantra in Dance*, 87–88.

it…"[46] As an act of *sādhana,* Kathak is a point of communication between the dancer and the Divine.

Being a performance art with devotional qualities manifests Kathak as an *axis mundi* for an ideal audience. The communal aspect of *axis mundi* is essential in Eliade's use of the theory and is also an inseparable element of a Kathak performance. This performance conveys mythology and qualities of divine figures through movement while simultaneously inviting viewers into a spiritual experience. Kapila Vatsyayan notes how an adept dancer goes beyond the individual self and how the "work of art is *yantra*—the device through which the *sādhaka* [devotee] sees the vision of the Absolute as much as the audience to whom the work is presented."[47] Kathak thus fulfills the explicit explanations of *axis mundi* given by Eliade in *Patterns of Comparative Religion* as well as implicit qualities gleaned from examples and descriptions he has provided. The entire practice and performance is *axis mundi,* from consecration to community connection.

Using the concept of *axis mundi* in an interpretation of Kathak has shed light onto elements of religion present in the dance form. As many have noted, examining religious phenomena through an archetypal framework often results in a one-sided, arguably simplistic interpretation as a "result of a sudden intuitive leap to simplicity"[48] and "highly subjective, uncritical, hasty generalizations."[49] Yet, a theoretical approach—when accompanied with other

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[46] Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 13.

[47] Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*. (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1968), 10.

[48] Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 23.

[49] Allen, "Phenomenological Method and the Dialectic of the Sacred." 72–81.

methodologies, practitioner perspectives, and contextual information—provides yet another lens to view a ritual or phenomena.[50] Through this process one can see how Kathak maintains religious qualities that lead practitioners into a spiritual experience. This observation leads to further investigation into the cultural and religious contexts in which the dance has evolved and how different religious teachings are manifested in the practice.

Devotional qualities, community connections, transmission from teacher to student, and the aspiration to experience transcendence are all evident in a theoretical interpretation. Understanding why these themes have thrived in the midst of change requires analyzing the major influences of religious thought and practice and a shift from a Western theoretical approach to the use of Eastern theory and practice.

Devotion: *Bhakti*, *Rasa,* and Kathak

Many have said that it is impossible to separate Indian arts from religious thought. Whether the art is overtly religious or not, "it is obvious that there is religion *in* the performing arts of India: the ageless mythology, as well as the references to religious paths toward ultimate spiritual goals, have formed the narrative, structural and teleological goals of music, dance, and drama since ancient times."[51] Examining the ties between Kathak and religious thought and ritual provides a nuanced understanding of the dance's religious qualities. A theoretical approach, using *axis mundi,* revealed how this dance form engages practitioners and audience members in a

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[50] In this paper the flaws of an archetypal approach and specifically Eliade's theories are not discussed in depth, for further information the reader may reference J.Z. Smith's *Imagining Religion* or Guilford Dudley III's *Religion on Trial: Mircea Eliade & His Critics*.

[51] Schwartz, Susan L. *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.

spiritual experience. An examination of Kathak's religious context and growth shows the dance's ability to cover a wide range of religious thought by going beyond mythology and incorporating multiple teachings from Bhakti philosophies of *rasa* and devotion to Sufi rituals. This section will specifically examine Kathak's relationship with the concept of *rasa* within the Bhakti tradition and how this overlaps with Sufi religious expression.

The shift to devotional practices in Medieval India, known as the Bhakti movement, significantly influenced Indian religious expression in art, philosophy, teachings, and practices. The term *bhakti* carries with it two distinct references — that of the historical Bhakti movement(s) marking a societal shift in religious expression throughout the sub-continent, and the personal, intimate devotion of a worshipper. Bhakti is thus used to describe a wide array of beliefs, practices, social movements, and literature. John Statton Hawley, noting the diversity and uniqueness of various Bhakti traditions, points to distinct elements of religious practice that characterize Bhakti, including: devotional songs in the vernacular, the consideration of all demographics in a society as potential devotees, and the way it generally "trumpets the cultivation of personal experience as against external or ritual punctiliousness, or at least clearly prioritizes the former in relation to the latter."[52] Influential in this movement was the writings of poet-saints, the commentaries on their work and the arts and acts of devotion they inspired. Encouraging diversity by fostering personal devotion, the Bhakti tradition is vast and to properly cover it and the teachings and poetry therein would take many years and many volumes. An in-depth discussion of even one teaching is beyond the scope of this paper, therefore the discussion

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[52] Hawley, John Stratton. *A Storm of Songs : India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement.* 2015, 6-7.

will introduce Bhakti movement's influence on the performing arts through the concept of *rasa* and devotion and how this is expressed in Kathak dance.

The Taste of Devotion in Dance

Rasa, simply defined as "flavor" or "essence," has dozens of definitions within the context of food, aesthetic theory, and religious thought. Lee Siegel describes the complexity of the concept in *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions:*

> *Rasa* is at once an inner and outer quality as the object of taste, the taste of the object, the capacity of the taster to taste that taste and enjoy it, the enjoyment, the tasting of the taste. The psychophysiological experience of tasting provided a basis for a theory of aesthetic experience which in turn provided a basis for a systemization of a religious experience. [53]

As a food connoisseur understands and appreciates the complexity of flavors, *rasa,* in aesthetic theory, is something that is developed and refined by the artists and the audience with time and exposure. The appreciation of the art comes from a growing understanding of the complexity of the form and the content of the work. In the performing arts of India, *rasa* is developed through mastering the portrayal of the eight (sometimes nine) *rasas* as outlined in instructional writings regarding the performing arts.[54] These *rasas* are expressions of the *bhāvas,* emotions or moods. *Rasa* is fully embodied by the performer and understood by the audience when the essence of the *bhāvas* is felt and experienced. Just as the tasting of food is ultimately a

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[53] Siegel, Lee. *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions, as Exemplified in the Gītagovinda of Jayadeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 43.

[54] The ninth *rasa* is added in commentaries of the *Nāṭyaśāstra.*

personal experience, so is feeling and embodying *rasa.* The experiential nature of *rasa* is a direct connection to *bhakti* philosophy, becoming an essential element of devotional expression.

The devotion in *bhakti* ritual practices is manifested in a variety of ways — it is a "heart religion, sometimes cool and quiescent but sometimes hot—the religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and often personal challenge…"[55] Acts of devotion are often expressive in nature, from the writing of poetry to *pūjā,* a core practice of *bhaktas* (devotees). Exact *pūjā* rituals vary, but the majority include the process of inviting the deity or deities into the sacred space, recalling stories of that deity, and offering gifts of food, clothing, etc. Ranging from simple to complex, these rituals can be performed by any devotee in a plethora of settings. Simplicity makes *pūjā* accessible and personal. It is the simplicity and accessibility of devotion that allowed this movement of ideas, rituals, and art to be "historically contagious."[56]

According to Ron Valle and Nancy Floyd, devotion, a core element in many religious traditions, is a psycho-spiritual dimension of human experience that has received little research, yet has large implications on relationships, daily life, and creativity.[57] *Bhakti*, being the yoga of love and devotion, comes out of deep concentration that often results in an external action depicting an internal knowledge and connection with the Divine. It is important to note that the expressive nature of *bhakti* is dynamic, vibrant, diverse, and fluid and one "particular experience can be different than the devotional experience of others… [and] may be independent of any

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[55] Hawley, *A Storm of Songs,* 2.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Valle, Ron and Nancy Floyd. "Psychology of Devotion and Devotional Experience: A Developmental Perspective." *The Humanistic Psychologist* 45, no. 2 (2017): 109.

object of worship…"[58] *Bhakti*, therefore is itself *rasa,* it is a taste and a sensual experience expressed by an individual yet visible at the community level. *Bhakti* as a form yogic meditation and practice, functions "as a practical method for controlling emotion through the use of devotional arts."[59] Kathak is clearly seen as a devotional art when placed at the intersection of *bhakti* as yoga and *bhakti* as *rasa.*

The premise of *bhakti* yoga is that "the Supreme Brahman, the ultimate object of all spiritual aspiration, is not only an impersonal energy or pure state of consciousness, but is also, and indeed is primarily, a loving personal deity who desires to liberate all beings."[60] Viewing Brahman in this manner inspired many *bhaktas* to express their devotion creatively, offering their talents to the deity and expressing their love and thankfulness through spoken word, song, and dance. Kathak dancers express this mode of devotion through consecrating the space as sacred, conveying stories of the deity, and embodying qualities of the Divine in movement.

Original and innovative choreography has been produced over the years to tell stories of Hindu mythology and beyond. *Rasa* as an aesthetic theory is an essential element in the training of Kathak dancers, and their knowledge of the concept directly affects the portrayal of the mythology. Due to the high standard required of the performers, their instruction is treated with the same care and respect as the transmission of religious rituals. The teachings and guidance of the guru and instructional religious texts are integral parts of a dancer's training.

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[58] Valle and Floyd, "Psychology of Devotion and Devotional Experience," 112.

[59] Frazier, Jessica. "Bhakti in Hindu Cultures." *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, no. 2 (2013): 106.

[60] Long, Jeffrey D. "Hindu Dharma: Unity in Diversity—A Pluralistic Tradition," *Dharma: The Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh Traditions of India*, ed. Veena R. Howard. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, Ltd, 2017), 67.

Bhāva and *rasa* are discussed extensively in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a treatise on the performing arts attributed to Bharata Muni. This treatise provides in-depth performance theory that instructs performers in correct portrayal of the *bhāvas* with the goal of creating a full sensory performance —an experience of *rasa.* The *sthayi bhāvas* (permanent/indwelling emotions) can be accessed by good acting. By accessing the *sthayi bhāvas rasa* can be experienced.[61] Conveying these emotions, and therefore *rasa,* takes years of dedication. The practice becomes a form of devotion for the performer and a devotional experience for the audience.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the sacred text that provides instructions for the performers and gives insight into religious practices within performing arts. The significance of these teachings in theater and dance is to enable artists to guide the audience into "the bliss that comes from realizing (one's identity) with the highest Brahman, for it consists of repose on the bliss which is the true nature of one's own self."[62] The ideas of *mokṣa* (liberation) and *ānanda* (bliss) are core elements of several Dharmic traditions that can be difficult to understand intellectually. When embodied in artistic expression, the audience can comprehend the concepts experientially. The theory of *rasa* flourished in the Bhakti tradition because of the popularization of personal devotion and the individualization of religious experiences. In this context, *rasa* became an aesthetic, emotional experience available to any initiate, known as a *rasika. Rasa* engages all the senses similarly to how sight in *darśan* provides religious connection.

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[61] Schechner, Richard. "Rasaesthetics." *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 45, no. 3 [T171] (2001): 32.

[62] Schwartz. *Rasa*, 17.

Darśan, according to Diane Eck, is a prominent element of Hindu ritual that goes beyond gazing at a deity but inspires acts of devotion.[63] Seeing, perceiving, and being seen by the Divine is a succinct definition of *darśan.* Often referenced when discussing artistic representations of Hindu deities, *darśan* is an integral component of devotional dance and theater. "*Darśan* is linked to the awakening of *rasa* within the spectator/observer; seeing is gazing, knowing, and touching. Thus the visual is grasped through touch and it involves expressing feelings/ emotions."[64] Understanding *darśan* enhances an actor or dancer's portrayal of the *bhāvas.* Awakening *rasa* through *darśan* is embodied in several performing arts and is seen specifically in the *abhinaya* (acting section) of a Kathak performance.

The *abhinaya* section is where the *rasas* are most evident in movement, pantomime, eye gestures, and *hastas/mudras* (hand movements). This section of the dance is most often dedicated to conveying a story, often from Hindu mythology. Kathak, like several classical dance forms, is never mentioned directly in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or corresponding commentaries. According to Margaret Walker, the connection to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was later created by Kathak dancers, connecting it to the wider spectrum of Hindu religious and artistic thought.[65] Kathak is unique among the Indian classical dance forms in that the use of the nine *rasas, hastas,* and other teachings of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are not as strictly adhered to in performance, yet they do remain integral in the learning process and are used as a guide for aesthetic clarity and inspiration.

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[63] Eck, Diana L. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007), 3.

[64] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 106.

[65] Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*, 15.

Kathak's unique positioning as a performance art and personal practice reveals the presence of *bhakti* as a *bhāva/rasa.*

Vallabha, one of the many medieval philosophers and commentators on India's devotional practices, as well as an important religious leader among many *Vaiṣṇas* of northern India examined *bhakti* apart from devotional practice as something that could rise to the status of *rasa* through pure love of a deity:

> [for many early philosophers]… *bhakti* was considered to be a *bhāva* which would not rise to the status of *rasa*… In the *Bhāgavata, bhakti* appears as a distinctive *rasa.* All the worldly attachments and personal relations are here imaginatively transferred to God and this evokes a truly emotional response in the heart…. From the aesthetic point of view… *rasa* itself belongs to a state of imaginative experience where feelings are evoked by the imitative representation of reality."[66]

Vallabha's viewpoint is significant because it presents *bhakti* as a personal connection with the Divine, as a *rasa* because of imagination and emotional response. Kathak shows *bhakti rasa* in a performance when the dancer, channeling their imagination, creates an experience for the audience encouraging them to channel their own imaginations thus creating a devotional connection to the deity or deities being evoked. This is connected to the act of devotion in practice through

Figure 9: A dancer portraying *śṛṅgārarasa*.

[66] Pande, Susmita. *Medieval Bhakti Movement, Its History and Philosophy*. 1st ed. (Meerut, India: Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1989), 70.

bhakti rasa and the prominent *bhāva śṛṅgārarasa,* depicted as sensual, erotic love. Human love is often attributed as a representation of the deep love and devotion of a *bhakta* to their God, portrayed through *śṛṅgārarasa,* most frequently in the *abhinaya* section of a Kathak performance. Stories often told through the medium of Kathak are those of *Rādhā* and *Kṛṣṇa*. These stories are filled with the two emotionally longing to be with one another, which symbolizes the love and devotion of a *bhakta,* a notable theme in *bhakti* art and thought.

Although the Bhakti tradition is widespread throughout the religions of India, it is often associated with *Vaiṣṇavism*. Worship of *Kṛṣṇa*, an incarnation of *Viṣṇu*, without a priest as an intermediary, is a common *Vaiṣṇa* practice that attained widespread popularity as the Bhakti movement spread throughout the Indian sub-continent. This devotion was regularly expressed through singing and/or dancing in a way that "the aesthetic emotion of *rasa* was experienced through *bhakti* by the devotee (*bhakta*) in the form of divine bliss."[67] Chakravorty continues to note how *riyāz,* the ritual practice of Kathak, transmits *bhakti* to participants and observers, creating a communal act of devotion.

Kathak shares history and form with one of the most famous communal rituals of devotion seen in India, the *Raslīlā. Raslīlā* is a folk-drama enacted in many parts of India recalling the dance and various events shared by *Kṛṣṇa* and the *gopis* as depicted in the *Bhāgavad Purāṇa*. This re-enactment is a time of festivity filled with vibrant music and dancing. The primary performance begins with *pūjā* and then proceeds to tell stories of *Kṛṣṇa*. Kathak is more formally constructed under classical guidelines of music, drama, and dance but shares core devotional qualities and elements of form with *Raslīlā*. *Riyāz* in Kathak and *Raslīlā* both express

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[67] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 105.

Nimbarka's concept of *bhakti*. Nimbarka, a philosopher of the twelfth century, commented specifically on *Vaiṣṇava* theology. Susmita Pande in her commentary of Nimbarka's work and thoughts commented on his view of *bhakti* as the "spiritual kinship of the soul and God… the basis of devotional worship. *Bhakti* is essentially a personal relationship of a loving nature. Brahman is conceived as a personal God and identified with *Kṛṣṇa*, His eternal power is *Rādhā* and the two are inseparable companions."[68] The stories enacted by Kathak and *Raslīlā* tell of loving personal relationships, and invite participants and observers into acts of devotion.

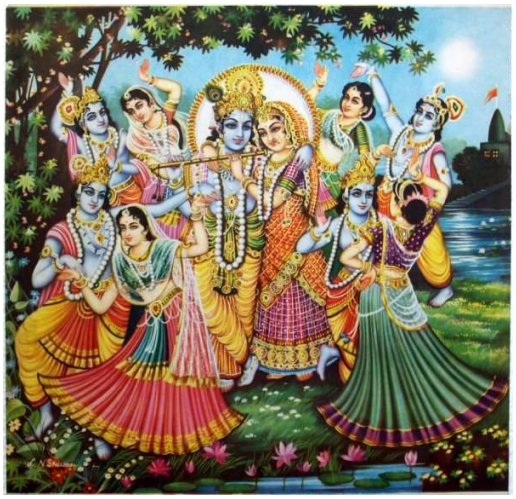
Figure 10: Depiction of *Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa līlā*

Chakravorty elaborates on the connection between Kathak and *Raslīlā* arguing that the "evocation of the 'absolute self' evoked through *rasa* ultimately triggers the cultural memory of the mythic narrative of *Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa līlā,* patterned after erotic, human love… Through rhythm and repetition, the performer enters the eternal circular space of *Raslīlā,* which is symbolically marked by the cyclical time of melodic circles in the Kathak repertoire."[69] Through movement and storytelling, Kathak and *Raslīlā* share in making ritual devotion accessible to wide audiences while simultaneously conveying more complicated aesthetic excellence and *bhakti* philosophies to the educated observer or participant. The audience is transported into a world where all of their senses are engaged. They are able to

[68] Pande, *Medieval Bhakti Movement*, 70.

[69] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 111.

"taste" the excellence of artistry through *rasa* and partake of a transcendent, devotional experience.

Using the concept of *rasa* as the chain that links Kathak to the Bhakti tradition is one way to position the dance form within the broader religious practices of India. By focusing on the concept of *rasa*, Kathak's connection to devotional forms of worship is highlighted. Devotion to a deity is not the only form of devotion seen in Kathak performers. In order to excel in the art form and portray the *rasas,* a Kathak performer must surrender to the dance and devote significant amounts of time and energy to the practice. Serious dedication is required to excel in any art form. Consider the hours a ballet dancer or musician dedicates to their art. Kathak dancers approach their art in a similar fashion. Due to the dance form's ties to religious thought and ritual the dance rises to an act of devotion and is often "referred to as a *sādhana* 'a means of accomplishing something,' 'a discipline undertaken to achieve a spiritual or ritual goal.'"[70] Several scholars and practitioners refer to the *riyāz* as a form of *sādhana* that guides the *sādhaka* in their art and spiritual practice.

The interplay of the arts and religious texts brings forth art forms that encompass and express religious ideas and teachings while going beyond boundaries created by orthodoxy. In Indian performing arts the performance of religious texts is a direct expression of the sacred. "It is through the performative modes that the sacred becomes palpable in India."[71] Kathak manifests the sacred in a way that engages the senses. Through this dance one can taste, see, feel, and hear the *śastras*, mythologies, and teachings. *Darśan, mantra*, *rasa,* and many other qualities

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[70] Skiba, Katarzyna. "Redefining Hybridity in Contemporary Kathak Dance." Przegląd Kulturoznawczy, 4/2016 Accessed October 10, 2018, (n.d.). doi:10.4467/20843860PK.16.034.6495.

[71] Schwartz, *Rasa*, 8.

integral to the Hindu tradition are experienced in a distinct and relevant manner. These qualities transmit Kathak beyond the boundaries of religion and politics, bringing performer and audience alike into an embodied experience of transcendence and *ānanda* (absolute bliss) through devotion.

Kathak is thus accessible to a wider group of people and has grown in form because of its flexible and creative nature. The deep connection Kathak has to the Hindu tradition has not constrained it to a specific group of people or worldview, rather it has been and is continually influenced by its surrounding environment of culture and ideas. The multiplicity of influence is evident in the similarities of Kathak and several Sufi ritual practices. The similarities of ideas and artistic expression come from the shared geographic space and roots of devotion of both Kathak and Sufism.

Bhakti and *Qawwali*: Connecting Kathak and Sufism

Ties between Sufi rituals and Kathak can be discussed from many angles, from the music and *chakkars* (pirouettes) to the devotional qualities. As touched upon in Chapter One, much scholarship and internal teachings of Kathak have emphasized a one-sided, Hindu perspective of its origins and development. The Muslim influences on the dance are often omitted completely, glossed over, or portrayed negatively. Excluding the diversity of religious experiences present in Kathak provides a narrow understanding of its relevance in modern society. Examining the multiplicity of religious influences, specifically Sufism, will result in a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the nature of Kathak as a religious ritual, both historically and in the

present age. Observing the movement, the music, and the impetus for creation reveals the hybridization of Hindu and Sufi thought, art, and beliefs present in Kathak.

Watching movement qualities and choreographic structure provides insight into the cultural sharing that has influenced the development of Kathak. Performance arts place importance on creativity and gleans inspiration from other art forms, cultures, and ideas. For example, by analyzing the rise of American modern dance in the early 1900s in its historical and artistic context, the incorporation of qualities of Indian classical dance in the choreography is better understood. During this time, American choreographers and dance pioneers, such as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, were influenced by Russian Prima Ballerina Anna Pavlova's incorporation of Indian mythology on the western stage and the innovative Kathak of Madame Menaka's company's tour in the West.[72]

In conjunction with artistic inspiration, the modern dance pioneers were also influenced by the rise in popularity of Eastern philosophies in the West at this time. Looking at movement quality from this perspective provides insight into the changes within choreography as well as the ideas and intentions behind the movement. Choreography changes as society does, and these changes are a result not only from aesthetic inspiration but also religious ideas and rituals. Therefore, studying Kathak against the backdrop of other dance forms and artistic expressions uncovers similarities and cultural ingenuities in the choreography as well as the ideas expressed.

The resemblance of Kathak to the popular *Raslīla* of India was discussed previously, shedding light onto various religious and structural qualities of the dance form. Kathak, likewise,

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72 Joshi, Kusum. "Giants Who Reawakened Indian Dance." *Hinduism Today* 33, no. 2 (April 2011): 33. http://eres.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=59920711&site=ehost-live.

shares aesthetic similarities with dance forms of the neighboring countries of Central Asia. These nations have historically altered the political and religious landscape of India and, consequently, artistic expression as well. The *chakkars* of Kathak keenly resemble the Whirling Dervishes of Sufi mystics. Central Asian folk dance such as the Fergana and Xorazm styles share in the intricate eye movements, posture, and rhythms of Kathak.[73] Kathak's looser interpretations of the set *mudras/hastas* is reminiscent of the gestures prominent in Central Asian dance forms as well. The presence of Kathak in the Mughal courts explains the sharing of movement and musical qualities; these qualities were not shared in isolation but conjoined to rituals and beliefs of Islam, specifically Sufism. Due to the scope of this paper, the sharing of aesthetic qualities between these dance forms will be left for future research, while the relationship between religious rituals will be further discussed.

Figure 11: Uzbek Fergana style dancer

The most evident connection between Kathak dance and Sufi rituals is seen in a comparison of the dance form to a *qawwali,* one of the most widely-known South Asian Sufi rituals. A *qawwali* is a community oriented spiritual performance (*samā*) that utilizes different literatures , primarily *ghazal,* the poetry of unrequited love. The poetry is accompanied by vocalists, rhythmic drumming, and often the harmonium. The instrumentation fosters an electric energy that emphasizes the *qual* (word) and invites participation, encouraging those involved to be moved by the literature and actively express their devotion. The literature present in *qawwalis* is as diverse as the languages of the performances. The multiplicity of languages (Arabic,

[73] The author personally witnessed these similarities while living in Central Asia and learning various dance forms (2014-2015).

Punjabi, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, etc.) reflects the cultural complex of religious traditions that share in the experience of *qawwali.* Adapting to the cultural milieu of South Asia, *qawwalis,* naturally integrate the language and literature of the people and religious groups they are around. There are many elements, such as the *namāz* (prayers)*,* that indicate that the entire ritual is Muslim in origin and in its primary beliefs, yet the fluidity of expression and emphasis on devotion presents *qawwali* as a relevant ritual to a variety of people.

The malleable nature of religious expression of a *qawwali* encourages incorporation of other traditions in the performance; allowing elements of the performance to be incorporated into artistic expression of other religions. In recent times, as a result of growing popularization and westernization, the choreography of other Indian classical dance forms, such as Bharatanatyam have begun incorporating Sufi ideas and *qawwali* musical qualities in their choreography.[74] This choreography, combining Sufi and Hindu expression, is inspired by the shared devotional themes of "lover-beloved" between the traditions. This incorporation is a recent development in the classical dance forms, apart from Kathak.

Unlike its counterparts, Kathak choreography did not retrospectively integrate Sufi thought and ritual in performance, but the evolution of the dance form, in technique and content, was influenced by Muslim music of the Mughal courts as well as the growing popularity of *qawwali.* The *bhāvas* and *rasas* were maintained with the dance's integration into the courts but increased technicality was brought to the music and choreography, birthing the Kathak structure taught today. The blending of expression was a natural hybridization that allowed Kathak to

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[74] Zubko, Katherine C. *Embodying Bhakti Rasa: Dancing Across Religious Boundaries in Bharata Natyam*. PhD diss., Emory University, 2008. Accessed October 18, 2018. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
This dissertation discusses the recent choreographic endeavors Malini Srinivasan and the use of *qawwali* in Bharatanatyam and the sharing of ideas between Muslims and Hindus based on Bhakti *rasa.*

grow and thrive. Without the ability to change and incorporate new ideas, Kathak might have become a lost art form transitioning under Mughal authority, but Kathak adapted and maintained relevance to people of differing worldviews. Chakravorty, after discussing the flourishing of the arts as an expression of the blending of Sufi-Bhakti philosophy, points to the direct connection of Kathak and *qawwali* that is associated with the sharing of the devotional themes of love and longing in Sufi and Bhakti rituals:

> The genre of *thumrī*, closely associated with the romantic longing of Bhakti and Sufi, engages in the erotic and sensuous love-play between *Rādhā* and *Kṛṣṇa*. The deep connection between Sufi *qawwali* and *thumrī* is expressed through words such as *majlis* and *mujra*. The former, usually associated with the concept of *samā* (*majlis-i-sama*), refers to Sufi gatherings for listening or meditation. The latter, associated with Kathak soirees and the *tawaifs*, depicts erotic dancing. But *mujra* is also a 'choreographed ritual of salutation'… Overall, the word evokes images of fluidity associated with dance and supplication to a higher authority—either patron or God. Both *mujra* and *majlis* are gatherings of sensuous experiences leading to spiritual and ecstatic transcendence. [75]

As a religious ritual, a *qawwali's* emphasis on the ecstatic nature of experiencing and loving the Divine is similar to *śṛṅgārarasa* prevalent in Kathak. *Qawwalis* are inspired by Sufi poetry and these poems are often sung in conjunction with the rhythmic beating of the *dholak* and other musical instruments. Kathak and *qawwali* participants, through movement, music, and literature, seek transcendence. The *qawwal* (performer) through the act of performing and the listener through the act of listening "'*samā*' hopes for a spiritual experience of intensity and

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[75] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 37.

immediacy that transcends his conscious striving."[76] This transcendent quality is generated by the improvisational elements in a performance. Through mastery of the musical technique, a *qawwal* is able to let the inspiration fuel the improvisation, kindling the intensity and ecstasy of Sufi devotion. According to ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi, within a *qawwali,* the *qawwal* improvises by means of adding to or repeating lines of the poetry, as well as in the beating of the *dholak* within the prescribed meters. Under the umbrella of Indian classical music, *qawwalis* allow fluidity in the *rāgas* (framework in Indian classical music) by enhancing the personal experience of devotion and transcendence of the performer.

Kathak likewise utilizes improvisation within the classical structure to invite the performer into a personalized religious experience, specifically for the advanced practitioner. In a personal interview with Bhakti Bhatwadekar, a young professional Kathak dancer and aspiring teacher, she noted how improvisation and creative freedom have the ability to transform the dance beyond its technical structure. "Kathak—when you know the technique, allows for creative freedom. The creative freedom brings self-awareness which allows for a spiritual connection."[77] *Qawwalis* express this desire for spiritual connection overtly, whereas Kathak subtly portrays the ecstatic qualities that Hindu and Sufi devotional art readily display. These qualities of artistic expression shared by many Hindus and Muslim Sufis are found under the umbrella of devotional practice inspired by the Bhakti tradition.

Hinduism and Islam are vastly different in regards to history, practice, and worldview but at the time of the Bhakti movement's rise to prominence in northern India, religious boundaries

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[76] Qureshi, Regula. "Indo-Muslim Religious Music, an Overview." *Asian Music* 3, no. 2 (1972): 1, doi: 10.2307/833955.

[77] Bhatawadekar, Bhakti, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, June 2018.

were challenged by the teaching of "a shared sense of the all-pervasive divine presence and its accessibility to all who approach it with true devotion and a sincere, humble heart."[78] Both Sufism and the Bhakti movement attracted those ostracized by religious orthodoxy and societal marginalization, therefore lines separating Islam and Hinduism were blurred by the emphasis on devotion and transcendence.

Through Sufi and Bhakti saints, cultural integration became evident in several religious rituals throughout South Asia. As devotion was increasing in popularity as a form of religious expression, the accessibility of religious teachings and texts was enhanced by these saints and writers. From music to poetry to dance, the Bhakti movement produced cultural ingenuity in the arts. Madhu Trivedi notes how Hindustani music evolved in the medieval centuries as that grew in popularity as the west Asian and Indian musical forms were integrated by Sufi saints.[79] The combining of the "aspirations and erotic sentiments of the Sufi mystics resonated with the performative and emotive qualities of the Bhakti poets and the two reconciled to forge a common religious, cultural, and aesthetic landscape."[80]

The amalgam of Sufi and Bhakti cultural expression stemmed from the sharing of musical techniques and theories, but this "religious, cultural, and aesthetic landscape" was profoundly influenced by the shared practices and beliefs of Hindus, Muslims, and other traditions interconnected by devotional practice. Hindu Bhakti and Sufism find common ground in a wide range of topics from poetry to philosophy. In a comparison of Bhakti and Sufi poets,

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[78] Long, "Hindu Dharma," 79.

[79] Trivedi, Madhu. "The Contribution of Sufi and Bhakti Saints in the Evolution of Hindustani Music." *Sufism and Bhakti Movement: Contemporary Relevance*, ed. Hamid Hussain. (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2007), 263.

[80] Chakravorty, Pallabi. "Modernity in Bhakti and Bhakti in Modernity: Kathak and Kabir." *Performing Arts and South Asian Literature* 5 (2005): 93.

David Fowler describes Sufi poets as Muslims who "sought to go beyond the letter of the law in order to engage directly the spirit enshrined within it. Instead of concerning themselves with knowing the minute details of Islamic theology or worldly application of Islamic law, the Sufis sought to embody authority based on their direct intuitive knowledge (*ma'rifa)* or experience of the Divine."[81] Again, the purpose of the ritual and the art is to experience the Divine. This mirrors the emphasis on the experiential knowledge and devotion that pervades the concept of *rasa* in *bhakti* devotional expression. The poetry of Sufis and *bhaktas* reveals this desire and often describes the love of the Divine as something ecstatic and erotic. This theme is seen in Hindu mythology and poetry, as well as in Sufi poetry, and is expressed via the performing arts inspired by both.

The synchronization of Bhakti and Sufi poetry and philosophy was embodied in Kathak due to this dance form's presence in the Mughal courts, explaining many of the shared elements of structure between *qawwali* and Kathak.[82] This sharing of literature and ideas is revealed in Kathak's usage of Sufi poems in performances and the veneration of figures from both traditions in *qawwali.* Hindu mythology remains the most common form of literature expressed by the dance form in the *abhinaya* section, but the underlying purpose for telling the stories or poems remains the same. The purpose of the dance is not literal portrayal of the stories or words, but rather the erotic love of the Divine quintessential in Sufism and Bhakti, therefore the literature is

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[81] Fowler, David, et al. *Guru Nānak among Sants, Bhaktas, and Sufis: A Comparative Study.* PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara (2017), 131, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

[82] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 37.

a medium used by the dancer to convey the "inner emotional longing" to be connected with the Divine.[83]

Although Kathak is propelled by a desire for a spiritual experience, the overwhelming number of Hindu deities in performances, initially lead the viewer to associate the dance form with *saguṇa bhakti,* external devotional practices situated around embodiments of the Divine. External practices, such as *pūjā*, are an integral element in many Kathak performers' daily life and practice, yet the dance form itself is not tied to these boundaries. In fact, it is the ability of Kathak to encompass elements of *saguṇa bhakti, nirguṇa bhakti* (devotion to the Divine not manifested in physical form), and Sufi practices that has allowed it to grow in significance and transcend religious boundaries in the modern age.

Kathak, in its current form, reflects the diversity it has come into contact with over time. The interplay of religious rituals has added inspiration to the dance form and has sealed its role as a devotional art in India. Kathak tells stories. It invites dancers and the audience into a religious experience. It is the story of the dance's journey through histories and cultures that deeply reveal its devotional nature. More examples could be used to connect Kathak to both Hinduism and Sufism, the ones chosen in this section were used to reveal the emotive, spiritual nature of devotional rituals as embodied in Kathak. As the Bhakti traditions shows Kathak's ties to dichotomous religious traditions, an examination of the *guru-śiṣya* (teacher-disciple) relationship will affirm the positioning of this dance form in the religious traditions of India.

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[83] Chakravorty, "Modernity in Bhakti and Bhakti in Modernity," 95.

CHAPTER THREE

Tradition in Transmission — A Balancing Act

The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* (the tradition of teacher and disciple) has played a vital role in transmitting the arts in the religious milieu of India for centuries. Guru is roughly translated as teacher in English, although this translation does not do the title justice. Derived from Sanskrit, the word guru is nuanced in its meaning but generally depicts an authority figure who dispels ignorance through the transmission of tradition and teachings, the recipient being the *śiṣya*. The *śiṣya* is considered a disciple, not just a student, because of the amount of time and devotion dedicated to the guru and the learning process. The *guru-śiṣya* system has been a cornerstone in the maintenance of tradition in India and continues to actively balance tradition and change in the sub-continent today.

With the steady increase of globalization, methods of artistic learning have undergone many changes and adaptations. This chapter will examine how the relationship between guru and *śiṣya* in Kathak has changed over time, revealing the dance form's role as a ritual relevant to current dancers as it guides students in their personal explorations of spirituality and negotiations of tradition, change, virtue, and morality. A brief look at the role of the guru in Indian artistic traditions will be examined before discussing historical and current streams of transmission in Kathak.

The Importance of the Guru in Indian Arts

It is commonly accepted by scholars that the arts of India directly correlate with religious thought. Teaching of the arts is therefore treated with the same weight and responsibility of

teaching religious practices, philosophies, etc. Ultimately, the guru dispels ignorance of all kinds therefore there are gurus for spiritual development, the arts, and other endeavors. The importance of the guru is referenced in ancient Indian literature including the *Vedas, Purāṇas,* and *Tantras* and has been taught throughout the history and evolution of religions in India. Although the role of the guru varies between texts and over time, it remains important in society. When learning new information and performing rituals, the instruction of the guru is necessary, especially in the Tantric traditions dealing with esoteric knowledge. An examination of the rigor and method of transmitting the arts resembles that of esoteric traditions, thereby making the guru necessary in the pursuit of artistic development.

The influence of diverse religious traditions on the evolution of Kathak has further enhanced the role of the guru in the transmission of the arts. In several spheres Kathak is connected to Tantric traditions. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the theory of *rasa* (flavor or essence) has heavily impacted and has arguably shaped what we now know as Indian classical art. Abhinavagupta, one of the leading philosophers of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and commentator on aesthetic theories such as *rasa,* was predominantly influenced by Kashmiri *Śaivism*. *Rasa,* influenced by Kashmiri *Śaivism* and the relationship of the arts to *rasa* and other theories reveals the deep connection of thoughts and practices between Tantrism and the artistic process. This is evidenced in many aspects of Kathak and other arts and is likewise seen in how the arts are held as protected esoteric knowledge given by guru to disciple.

The emphasis on the guru in the arts rose simultaneously with the increase in guru worship and guru deification that came alongside the Bhakti tradition. Specifically in the *Śaiva* and *Vaiṣṇava* sects, the guru was not only instructor and guide but also a representative of the

Divine. "All religious schools are agreed that the one who has the authority to initiate others is the qualified guru… whom *Śaivas* as well as *Vaiṣṇavas* often regard as representing God himself."[84] Therefore, the rituals of the *śiṣya* surrounding the guru resemble *pūjā* to personal deities with the inclusion of touching the guru's feet, burning of incense etc. In this relationship between guru and *śiṣya*, devotion becomes a means of dispelling ignorance and achieving liberation.

In most cases, the *guru-śiṣya* relationship in the arts resembles the methods of other streams of religious instruction in the sub-continent. The required initiation of the disciple seen in the Tantric traditions and the devotion and surrender integral in the *bhaktas'* worship are likewise expressed in the teachings of classical music, dance and other arts. The traditional *guru-śiṣya* method specific to teaching Kathak is known as *gurukul/gurukula*, and was most prominent in the times surrounding Indian independence. Within this system, the disciple lived in the family home of the guru, serving and learning in ways that extended beyond their art. Being a serious undertaking and extensive time commitment, the student had to commit fully to the art and guru. The relationship begins on the unconditional surrender of the student to the guru and the teachings. The disciple became a devotee not only to the art and the Divine but also to the guru. The *gurukula* served as a holistic style of teaching that emphasized the guru's role as transmitter of both artistic and religious traditions. Although Kathak gurus are associated with artistic knowledge, they are under the broader umbrella of a tradition of gurus in South Asia:

> If the word "guru" means many things, it is because the guru is many things… Primarily, however, the guru is the personal teacher of spirituality, that is, of the basic, ultimate

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[84] Gonda, J. *Viṣṇuism and Sivaism: A Comparison*. Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion ; 1969. London: Athlone P., 1970, 64.

> values perceived within the Hindu tradition. Further, the guru possesses experiential knowledge, not only intellectual knowledge, of these values. In a word, the guru is indispensable for spiritual development.[85]

Similarly, the Kathak guru, likewise is indispensable for artistic and religious teaching and out of surrender and devotion students deeply respected and adhered to the guru's knowledge, a guarded secret and privileged information. Integrated into all elements of the learning process, respect for the guru was evident from the tasks of servitude in the home to the specificities in the dance sequence and movements. Beginning each class and each performance the dancer performs a *pranām,* showing reverence and submission to god, guru, and audience.[86] Ritually this relationship and the responsibilities of both disciple and guru is established in the *gaṇḍābāndhanā* (thread-tying) ritual:

> The tradition of transmitting the esoteric doctrines/knowledge on the lines of the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* in the… tying of the sacred thread/knot around the wrist of the *śiṣya* to the guru and the *śiṣya* thus joining the guru's family as a member… the student thus becoming a custodial of the tradition.[87]

This role the guru played in the students' lives kept the religious elements and tradition of Kathak alive and vibrant in the midst of change. The devotion of the disciple to the art and guru insured that the dance would be kept in its "pure form." In the home of the guru the *śiṣya* would spend hours a day training and would simultaneously be taught religious rituals, history,

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[85] Mlecko, "The Guru in Hindu Tradition," 32.

[86] Chatterjea, Ananya. "Training in Indian Classical Dance: A Case Study." *Asian Theatre Journal* 13, no. 1 (1996): 71.

[87] Srivastava, *Tantra Mantra Yantra in Dance,* 92.

and values of living. The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* economically served the guru and *śiṣya* by providing acts of service for the guru and instruction and lodging for the disciple, however it was also designed "to preserve the very 'essence' of the art form as pristine and uncorrupted by outside influences as it got transmitted from one generation to the next."[88] This pedagogical method focused on the student replicating the moves of the teacher in *riyāz* (ritual practice). Maintaining the specific style tied the student to both the hereditary and stylistic tradition of their guru. The replication of movement immortalized the guru's style while the *gurukul* system immortalized the knowledge and beliefs connected to the dance:

> The student became integrated with the guru's life and the guru was a force in shaping all aspects of the student's life. The relationship was intensely hierarchical wherein the student was required to show gratitude to the guru for his treasured guarded secret through a complete surrender of her/himself… In short, it meant a complete emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical surrender to one's guru.[89]

Overall, the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* was an effective means of dance pedagogy that encouraged devotion, maintained tradition, and aided Kathak's survival economically as well as in form.

The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* distinguished many of the arts of India, including Kathak, as unique from artistic pursuits in the West, enhancing the religious nature of such endeavors. This is not to say that western artists are not devoted to their process, but in South Asian traditions the artists are not devoted primarily to personal artistic achievement but are devoted to the guru, the art, and are actively engaged in an act of *sādhana* (worship). As Kapila Vatsyayan poses it the

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[88] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 31.

[89] Ibid., 140.

goal of the artist is not self promotion or self actualization but a desire to become a part of a larger tradition. The *śiṣya* not only learns from the personal guru but also becomes a part of a distinct lineage of teaching and is held responsible for maintaining that tradition. The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* provides a platform for the arts, religious instruction, and lessons of morals to be carried from one generation to the next, yet with the changing of culture comes shifts in artistic transmission as well. As Donald Schon claims "our systems [of education] need to maintain their identity and their ability to support the self-identity of those who belong to them, but they must at the same time be capable of transforming themselves."[90] Kathak's adaptations have gradually changed over time. This transformation supports the self-identity of the practitioners and likewise encourages the audience to consider their identity in light of their cultural and religious heritage.

Creating and Preserving a Lineage

Chapter One revealed the difficulty in determining the ancient origins of Kathak, therefore knowing the method of transmission before the Mughal period is left to speculation through drawing tentative connections to the known religious practices of the time. The records of the Mughal and Rajasthani courts and the prominent patronage of the arts provide insight into the manner in which Kathak might have been taught, although details are sparse. Because of the scarcity of information and the current scope of this study, the method of transmission in the courts will only be briefly examined, focusing on the rising influence of the Brahman caste of

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[90] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 14.

Kathakas and the subsequent prevalence of the traditional *guru-śiṣya* method of transmission during the artistic renaissance.

It is believed by many that the pure form of Kathak was maintained during the rule of the Muslims by the hereditary caste of Brahman storytellers. This maintenance occurred on the outskirts of society because the Muslim courts supposedly debauched, secularized and changed the art as it was taught. As noted earlier, the historical record reveals a blending of Muslim and Hindu art, music, and dance in the evolution of Kathak. Although the codification of Kathak and subsequent strict pedagogical methods did not arise until later, the evolution of the choreographic form and musical connections can be attributed to a group of female Muslim dancers known as *tawaifs* (courtesans).

There are claims that the courtesans learned from men of the *Kathaka* caste yet there is no hard evidence to support this fact. The scarcity of records from this time regarding Kathak leave us with no concrete evidence on how the form was transmitted from one generation to the next. Preserving an artistic lineage was not the impetus for the continued teaching and formation of the dance form that would later evolve into Kathak—it was the preservation of jobs and artistic expression. The patronage of the courts kept these women employed, but also enabled them to pursue their intellectual and creative potential. However, the higher status of the *tawaifs* took a dramatic shift with British annexation, most significantly in the anti-*nautch* movement.

Margaret Walker notes that as the contributors to the dance we now call Kathak were being pushed aside by shame, the dance started taking shape as a stage performance. The high status of the courtesan dancer was stripped away as the “nautch girls” migrated to the fringes of society, bringing with them the rich artistic tradition of Kathak. Although a negative part of the

dance form's history, it was "during these very years… that Kathak as a stage dance was conceptually and choreographically taking shape. As the hereditary female performers of dance were legislated and shamed out of existence, the hereditary male performers, the *Kathaks*, were taking their place on center stage.[91]

Before becoming the leading exponents of the dance, the hereditary *Kathakas* overlapped in learning and performance with the *tawaifs.* The Lucknow *gharānā,* being the most prominent school of Kathak, is headed by Birju Maharaj. He is a hereditary *Kathaka* who traces his family line to the dancers under the patronage of the courts. His ancestor, Bindadin Maharaj, began his training when a select number of courts were still patrons of dance and music and therefore learned from and interacted with many of the Muslim courtesans. As the dance form was shifting out of the courts the method of transmission also changed to enhance the respectability and Hindu nature of the dance.

As the female leaders of Kathak dance were being pushed to the outskirts of society, the male exponents began to claim the stage. It is at this juncture that the hereditary Brahman caste of storytellers became the transmitters of the tradition of Kathak, the Maharaj family for example. This shift in teaching set the stage for the cultural renaissance that provided Kathak with the revered status it has now. By associating with a well-respected hereditary tradition, the dance form was able to be viewed by society as a positive element of culture rather than as entertainment performed by prostitutes. In order to gain this prestige, the women who developed and preserved the dance were dissociated with Kathak for many years. Although the negation of

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[91] Walker, *Kathak Dance,* 174.

their contributions is not a positive element of Kathak's history, it did allow for the survival of the dance form during the political shift from colonial rule to the newly independent India.

The heightened status of Kathak as an integral cultural tradition, per contribution from many male *Kathakas*, was a catalyst for the more structured *guru-śiṣya* model of transmission that was revived in the time surrounding independence. While it is impossible to know the exact method of teaching and preservation of Kathak through the ages, what is known is that with the reclamation of the dance and its deepening ties within the Hindu tradition brought a strict adherence to the *guru-śiṣya* model of teaching to ensure a proper maintenance of tradition. "The importing of *talim* (knowledge) is a selective process whereby the guru chooses a promising student to carry on the "pure" lineage of the tradition."[92] This selectivity ensures the maintenance of the tradition but also, according to Pallabi Chakravorty, "helped to preserve and perpetuate the tradition within a patriarchal, caste-based lineage."[93] As discussed in Chapter One, the emphasis on the lineage and caste of *Kathakas* credited male Brahmans with the transmission and preservation of Kathak, although it was the women courtesans who truly kept the art alive in the midst of change. This method of artistic instruction has persisted through time because of its affective maintenance of tradition, its socioeconomic role, as well as its ability to raise the arts to an acceptable status among religious societies in India.

Entertaining functionalist theories of religion for a moment shows that the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* functioned as a preserver of the arts from the pre-Mughal times to the present although its prominence came with the decrease of court patronage. The system, prior to

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[92] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 139.

[93] Ibid.

globalization, economically sourced the teaching of important and sometimes secret traditions of music, dance, and theater from one generation to the next. Serving the guru in the *gurukula* allowed the *śiṣya* to devote time and energy to the art rather than other careers, while the guru instructed them in various elements of life and art. Looking at the evolution of the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* of Kathak depicts how pedagogy and transmission balance tradition and change, connecting art and artist to their present societal needs and cultural settings.

Modes of Transmission

Overall, the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* has been an effective means of dance pedagogy and religious instruction and has distinctly influenced current streams of dance transmission although the traditional system has faded out for a variety of reasons and is rarely practiced. The transmission of Kathak has evolved, responding to the changes in India but elements of the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* have remained a central part of transmission as the *gurukul* declined and the presence of *gharānās* (specific schools of Kathak) increased. The *gharānās* have been influential in the popularization of Kathak, resulting in the growth of each stylistic school and the spread of the dance form throughout the nation. With the spread of the tradition came a multiplicity of gurus, both hereditary and non-hereditary, resulting in unique pedagogical styles as well as new distinct modes of learning Kathak. The teaching models present today can be categorized into four major groups—traditional, adapted-traditional, studio, and academic—each showing unique pedagogy in the way they transmit religious and artistic values to the next generation.

In the modern dance world of India the traditional *gurukul* system is almost non-existent. Dance students, many coming from upper to middle-class families, no longer have the time to

devote to this traditional, time intensive method as their other schooling and activities draw them into multiple spheres of learning. Although the transmission of Kathak is currently conducted in a variety of ways, many modes resemble the *gurukul* system keeping much of the tradition alive.

One of the most common ways to learn Kathak presently is what this author distinguishes as an "adapted-traditional" method. Calling it adapted-traditional denotes how this system of transmission has maintained traditional elements while slowly adapting to societal and artistic changes. It does not adhere strictly to older modes of teaching nor forgoes them completely, but instead attempts to balance the two. The most evident similarities between the *gurukul* system and the more prevalent learning structures of modernity are location and intention. In the less traditional setting the student does not reside with the guru permanently and is not given a vast array of outside tasks, but they do learn the dance in the guru's home or in smaller studio settings. The intimacy of learning in these localities provides a platform for transmission of movements as well as ideas, histories, and beliefs surrounding the form. Not being bound to the schedules of a larger school or studio also allows for a flexibility of time and scheduling, giving the dancer ample opportunity to devote to their guru and the art.

Abandoning the residency of the *gurukul* system while keeping the locus of learning within the guru's home allows for a small increase in the number of students without opening doors to a vast array of aspiring dancers requiring the guru to selectively choose students who can be held responsible for maintaining the tradition of Kathak and the specific qualities of the *gharānā*. The upholding of tradition in this form of learning remains a central element of a Kathak dancer's experience. It becomes the duty of the student to uphold not only the style of a

specific *gharānā* but also the specific style of the guru, thus becoming a part of a distinct lineage. Stacey Prickett, in an article about the pedagogy of Kathak and Bharatanatyam notes:

> In dance training, a broader education to underpin the art forms is also transmitted through assimilation of its contextual foundations (music, song, literature, mythology and religion). Kathak guru Munna Shukla explained that he can identify instantly not just the *gharānā* of a performer, but the dancer's guru, because 'many different qualities are evident—the guru's values and beliefs are transmitted along with the steps.'[94]

The discussion regarding the caste of *Kathakas* addressed the manner in which Kathak is confined to specific lineages of hereditary dancers of blood relation. With the expansion of Kathak, the hereditary connections still remain, but non-hereditary dancers have increased in prominence resulting in the lineage becoming stylistically bound to leading gurus. Within the three major Kathak *gharānās* one can find distinct stylistic lineages accredited to specific gurus, and it is the responsibility of the students to transmit that lineage to the next generation. There are few Kathak dancers who cannot tell you their dance lineage. Even after only a few months of learning Kathak basics, an early initiate should be able to can explain their new dance lineage. The guru is a definitive part of training and because of the intimacy and specificity of the relationship, few dancers train under multiple gurus.[95]

Figure 12: Author at *Nateshwar Bhavan* with the senior disciples of Rajendra Chaturvedi, disciple of the late Gopi Krishna

[94] Prickett, "Guru or Teacher?," 26.

[95] Field Research, Mumbai Maharashtra, June–July 2018.

The importance of lineage and maintenance of a pure dance form reflects the pedagogy of the *gurukul.* Kathak dancers learn by imitating their guru and repetition. As with any dance training, learning Kathak via traditional methods is strenuous and challenging. A dancer's *riyāz* can, and often does, take hours of their day. Unlike much of dance training in the West, repetition is more important than speed of learning or adaptability because of the importance of replication and memorization in order to maintain the qualities of the lineage. As a dancer trained in western classical and modern dance forms, I was initially taken aback by how I was expected to learn Kathak. Accustomed to learning combinations rapidly with acceptance of personal artistry and interpretation in the classroom, I was unaccustomed to the stress on exact replication and the lack of questions from other students. Overtime, through experience and research, I realized just how integral maintenance of tradition and adherence to one's lineage is to Kathak.

Straying from the *gurukul* system has opened Kathak to a broader range of students and audiences. Although the Kathak world maintains an heir of political patriarchy by placing male gurus on a pedestal, the role of women from diverse backgrounds as gurus and dancers is slowing increasing, in part because of the shift from the traditional *guru-śiṣya paramparā* to an adapted-traditional pedagogy. Maintaining the importance of one's guru and emphasizing the lineage remains, while the actual methods of teaching adapt to the growing diversity of students.

Because the students no longer reside with the guru, each guru can cater to a small increase in students. The increase in quantity results in a decrease in devoted time to each individual. Senior disciples do arise and are given more attention and more responsibilities than others, but the attention of the guru is still divided amongst the pupils. This division of attention, generally, does not result in a decrease in the quality of learning and does not detract from the

lessons of life, religion, and tradition that an experienced guru offers. The decreased time in training allows the students to maintain high caliber Kathak training while diversifying their education and experiences elsewhere. It also provides Kathak learning opportunities to a wider demographic of dancers.

Pallabi Chakravorty's ethnographic work on various Kathak schools in Calcutta reveals the diversity of women who are devoted to Kathak, yet have to balance dance with other responsibilities of life. Stories in *Bells of Change* are prime examples of the ways Kathak is accessible to more people. The result is a beautiful connection of aspiring artists to creativity, cultural heritage, and religious tradition:

> The traditional knowledge gained through *riyāz* inscribes women's bodies with mythical symbols and 'tradition' itself sharpens the very contours of the dancer's emotion, thought and action in the real world. Thus, their knowledge of classical dance gave them agency as women and helped them find various meanings and possibilities through their engagement with Kathak dance… Moreover, for many middle and lower-middle-class working women and housewives, their knowledge of Kathak allows them to nurture dreams of new possibilities….[96]

This diversity of Kathak dancers is not fostered in the state-sponsored schools or the strict *gurukul* system but is bred within the homes and small schools of Kathak gurus who seek to maintain specific traditions through making it known and accessible to the disciples.

The adapted-traditional method flourished because of economic needs as well the changes of society. Gurus are paid for their time, but in most situations this is not the impetus for

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[96] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 135.

Figure 13: Pandit Birju Maharaj of the Lucknow *Gharānā*

their service, merely a means of keeping the dance alive with minimal outside patronage and support. It is an opportunity for non-hereditary and hereditary dancers alike to grow in their art and partake in preserving the lineage. With more students naturally comes greater variation and change in the technique, but overall this method represents the maintenance of tradition while adjusting to the changing needs of society and dancers.

Lineage preservation in the teaching of Kathak is connected to the influence of stylistic schools known as *gharānās.* A *gharānā* is a specific school and style of Kathak and the modes of teaching come directly from the values presented in the traditional *gurukul* method. There are three primary *gharānās*: Lucknow, Jaipur, and Benares. The largest and most influential is the Lucknow *gharānā,* with the Jaipur and Benares *gharānās* each having a small following. Being tied to a hereditary tradition, *gharānās* have distinct stylistic qualities because the transmission of information has been selective and precise.

As the *gharānās* developed and as the Lucknow *gharānā* took center stage, the method of transmission grew in accordance with the increasing demand of students. Although more students gained access to the tradition, the lineage is still maintained through selective members of Kathak heritage. Paraphrasing Sunil Kothari, Prickett notes how Kathak's *gharānā* system is "transmitting knowledge via vertical access, while newer teaching enables horizontal access to a wider range and number of people."[97] The wider access came with the reclamation of the art in

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97 Prickett, "Guru or Teacher?," 29.

conjunction with state sponsorship, which brought knowledge of Kathak into broader spheres of society. Widespread popularity brought changes and more students, but did not distract from the importance of intentional transmission of the art. The intentionality of the guru lineage has allowed quintessential elements of the *guru-śiṣya paramparā* to be maintained in the midst of growth, diversity, and change in the teaching process.

Within each of these *gharānās,* schools and distinct gurus have grown significantly in number and in influence. From these stylistic schools, a strict Kathak syllabus and exam process has arisen. The syllabus insures proper teaching, and the exams require each student to exemplify their technique and knowledge before moving to higher levels of training and performance opportunities. Variations of the exams come with each *gharānā* because of the distinct styles, but the most prominent and widely disseminated is the Lucknow *gharānā.* The Kathak Kendra of the Sangeet Natak Academy in Delhi evolved out of this *gharānā*, giving rise to the influence and prestige of the Lucknow style through famous transmitters, such as Birju Maharaj.

It is in the Kendra where the emphasis on lineage and stylistic preservation is most evident. Placing emphasis on certain elements of the *guru-śiṣya* method of transmission, the school often does not admit students whose primary Kathak training came from outside of the lineage. Chakravorty notes that the strictness of the Kendra and the authority attributed to the gurus therein has led to a delegitimization of other styles and teachers of Kathak.[98] In terms of lineage preservation, this can be viewed in a positive light, but it has interestingly brought Kathak out of the homes of teachers into heavily institutionalized performance driven spheres.

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[98] Chakravorty, "Dancing into Modernity," 121.

In an effort to maintain tradition and purity of Kathak, the Kendra has popularized and glamorized the dance, inspiring others to attempt to emulate their methods to achieve similar levels of recognition. The result of this emulation is a variety of dance schools sprouting throughout the country and abroad. The variety of the dance schools and studios is vast, ranging from more traditional pedagogical methods to more commercialized, fusion, and westernized. These studios can be found throughout India and function similar to small dance studios found in the West. Kathak classes are offered alongside other dance forms such contemporary, hip-hop, etc. Students enroll by class and generally will take multiple dance forms or only participate in one to two classes per week. Whereas these studios excel at exposing young dancers to variety, they do not succeed in maintaining classical tradition, generally because of unqualified teachers, student's minimal time training, and the emphasis on performance.

Many of the more esteemed schools, such as the Kendra, look down on these non-hereditary and arguably non-traditional schools. This negativity is due to how smaller schools have changed the style and transmission of Kathak in what can be viewed as a clash between Eastern and Western artistic ideals, as noted in Vasanth Kiran's elaboration of Kapila Vatsyayan's depictions of an Indian artist:

> One of the central metaphors of Indian arts pedagogy is that of connecting the artist to a continuous tradition and, therefore, endowing him or her with a unique identity. "The artist does not seek self-actualization; rather his quest is to submerge himself in the perennial flow of tradition." This understanding, coupled with post-colonial construction of a "timeless, unchanging and continuous [tradition]," which needed to be "preserved

and propagated," has clashed with American/Western progressive ideals of individualism and originality.[99]

Elements of a Western dance class can be seen in many of these dance studios that offer Kathak. It is easy to find unqualified teachers, those who distort the technique, and those who westernize specific movements and styles. Yet, Kathak continues to be referenced as a classical dance form in all spheres. It is the students and schools who seek to maintain elements of tradition that rise to the forefront of both authority and popularity. It is by categorizing Kathak as a classical form that draws many students and upholds the dance's connection to a religious and artistic history.

In many middle to upper-class circles, parents strongly desire their children to be exposed to one or more of the Indian classical arts. Vasanth Kiran, a teacher of the classical dance of *Odissi,* another dance form originating in Eastern India*,* interviewed several of his students' parents to investigate why they wanted their child to learn classical dance. It was specific qualities associated with classical dance forms—not contemporary dance—that attracts many students and their families:

- To provide a grounding and connection to Indian culture, values, and ethos. These were values like respect, patience, developing a sense of self, co-existence and tolerance
- To inculcate a sense of physical and mental discipline
- As a practice of spirituality and devotion
- To create an empathy with the "Indian" identity in the face of "Western" influences [100]

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[99] Kiran, "Innovating Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā Traditions," 15.

[100] Kiran, "Innovating Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā Traditions," 16.

Parents in the West might enroll their children in classical ballet classes to enhance qualities of physical and mental discipline, respect, and artistic development, but spiritual and cultural identity are rarely, if ever, the impetus for a child's enrollment in ballet, unlike the classical arts of India.

Maniri Karulkar, in a personal interview, attested to the role that learning Kathak fills in society. Being both a personal teacher and professor of Kathak she has noted how in modern times students learn values and morals as well as mythology that might not be taught in the home in conjunction with their dance training.[101] Bhakti Bhatwadekar, in her transition from student to teacher, fondly recalled the values she learned from her guru in her Kathak training. She discussed learning overall moral values as well as values from various Indian religious traditions, not just Hinduism. Believing it is impossible to separate learning dance from learning religious and moral values, she does actively question if others are recognizing these qualities or if they are being driven by performance goals alone.[102]

Although there is a trend in Kathak training that is performance-driven and emphasizes fusion, while negating elements of the technique in studio training, there remains a large group of artists who are seeking to balance tradition and change. They note the rich history and its importance and relevancy, while addressing societal changes and the need for elements of adaptations. These dancers and teachers are paving new ways of learning, teaching, and performing Kathak that honor the tradition and maintain relevancy. Much of this balancing act is being conducted and discussed in the new collegiate spheres of learning Kathak.

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[101] Karulkar, Maniri, interviewed by the author in Pune, Maharashtra, India, July 2018.

[102] Bhatawadekar, Bhakti, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, June 2018.

Throughout India one can find certificate programs, undergraduate, and graduate degrees in Kathak at several universities and colleges. This method of transmitting Kathak attracts mostly students from adapted-traditional styles of learning and exposes them to other Kathak styles and gurus while challenging them to learn different nuances of artistic composition, dance history, and religious connections. As with university dance programs throughout the world, Kathak in the collegiate sphere is relatively new. An example of the curriculum and method of these programs can be seen in how Kathak training centers have partnered with universities to provide diverse dance education. Maya Rao, a prominent figure in Kathak, was one of leaders in this type of education fusion. The combining of Rao's Kathak training school with Bangalore University in 1987 resulted in a Bachelor's program whose "impressive syllabus includes 'World History of Dance,' '*Nāṭyaśāstra*' and classes in stage design, lighting, mime, and movement… [offering] a unique forum for dance education in India since it uses 'traditional dance methodology alongside modern pedagogical techniques, keeping pace with global trends in dance education.'"[103]

These programs play a unique role in fostering tradition and emphasizing the history, philosophy, and religious importance surrounding the performing arts, while also breaking down former methods of pedagogy that can hinder advanced dancers from developing their unique artistic outlook. The role of one's guru is not negated in these programs, but dancers are given the opportunity to learn outside of their foundational training, which arguably enhances that initial exposure and technical strength. Further education provides these committed dancers with a new lens through which to view their own art and an opportunity to explore artistic expression. Naturally, many contemporary styles and dance innovations come out of these programs, but the

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[103] Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance*, 85. The author recommends this book for more information regarding innovative choreographies of Indian dance forms.

classical dance fields of India are enhanced and are being given new inspiration and cultural connections as well.

Little research has been conducted about the structure, purposes, and outcomes of these programs. In conversations with a few students and professors of Kathak within the university, in conjunction with viewing choreography coming from these circles, a few themes of transmission and choreographic change can be noted.

Collegiate dance programs in general offer a wide curriculum of theory, practice, performance, etc. The goal is to develop well-rounded, thinking artists, who go beyond learning movement to understand dance history, composition, theory, relation to other fields of study, etc. Kathak programs are emulating many of these goals. Exposing dancers to more artists and new ways to approach their art provides a platform of exploration and creativity. With regards to Kathak, this is all done under the umbrella of classical composition. For example, Manisha Jeet, a young Kathak teacher and choreographer in Mumbai, explained how her collegiate studies of Kathak and the performing arts inspired her creative process. Adhering to the emotions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the technicality of Kathak movement, Jeet incorporated modern musical compositions and situations into her choreography. Her core training of dance came from her guru but from this foundation she was able to expand her knowledge and artistic expression upon advanced studies of theory and practice.[104]

Bhakti Bhatwadekar, a current Masters student of Kathak, likewise attributes her strong foundation of Kathak to her guru and feels a responsibility to carry on that lineage. She also has a desire to explore her own artistry in light of the theory and history she is learning in her

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[104] Jeet, Manisha, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, July 2018.

collegiate courses. The exposure is leading her to ask more questions about her art. It is also giving her the tools necessary to continue the tradition while exploring ways to make her artistic statements relevant to her audience and students.[105]

Continued and extensive research in India would be required to gain a more thorough understanding of how collegiate dance programs are affecting the transmission and performance of Indian classical dance forms. At this juncture it can be noted that, in Kathak studies, dancers trained in the academic spheres are actively seeking ways to maintain the tradition and technicality of the dance while exploring different texts, philosophies, compositions, and movement to maintain artistic ingenuity and cultural relevancy. Unlike the fusion dance forms of Kathak and Bollywood or Kathak and hip-hop, these artists, because of their extensive knowledge in religious and philosophical texts such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, try to adhere to and enhance those teachings in their creative process rather than changing elements of the dance completely.

The different styles of transmission reveal the variety possible within a single tradition and also uncover the rapidity in which the classical arts are having to adapt to their changing environment of an ever globalizing urban India. This brings us to question Kathak's role in the current religious spheres. The dance form has a distinct connection to religious history, inherent religious qualities, and the method of transmission that even in the midst of change is part of a larger system of religious teachings. These connections allow Kathak to be religiously relevant to a multiplicity of practitioners and audiences in urban India.

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[105] Bhatawadekar, Bhakti, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, June 2018.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kathak as Ritual

"The meaning of ritual is deep indeed.
He who tries to enter it with the kind of perception that distinguishes hard and white, same and different will drown there.
The meaning of ritual is great indeed."
- Xunzi

Examining Kathak throughout time has revealed how this dance form maintains religious relevancy in a variety of historical settings and how it is extending this relevancy and accessibility in modern, urban India. Examining religions in practice in urban India is a complex study that intersects with sociology, political science, and anthropology. This intersection most prominently delves into questions of secularization, modernization, and the circumstances of a rising middle class. Little research has been conducted on the way these changes are influencing the classical arts, or better yet, how the classical arts, and practitioners therein, are responding to and negotiating these changes. To understand Kathak's role as a ritual in the religious settings of metropolitan centers, the general effects of globalization, modernization, and secularization on the significant shifts in Indian religiosity have to be taken into account when analyzing why Kathak continues to attract artists and audiences.

Urban Desi: Religious and Secular?

Urban Desi is a new genre of music that blends Eastern and Western popular music styles. This phrase is also used to refer to many other elements of culture that reveal the melding of South Asian and Western traditions such as music and clothing. The word *desi* has roots in Sanskrit and the Hindi word *desh,* meaning country or homeland, and refers to someone or something coming from the Indian subcontinent. In urban India and the South Asian diaspora, *desi,* has also become a slang word referring to something—clothing, music, action, etc.—that is reminiscent of older traditions that are connected to a larger South Asian cultural heritage. The slang usage of *desi* and *urban desi* is primarily by people who have some degree of separation from their Indian heritage, whether living in the diaspora or embracing the modernization and globalization present in urban spheres. This phrase is analogous to this study because it displays the complexity of the current cultural spheres in India, including religiosity. Contemporary Indian culture is not wholly urban nor wholly *desi* but is a melding of multiple influences. Using the categorizing terms such as modernization, globalization, and secularization may limit the discussion on the growing diversity of practice and rituals to dichotomist perspectives, rather than revealing the wealth of cultural and ideological mixing, if not contextualized.

In the past few decades, as India has become more economically liberalized, the resulting changes are "often expressed in dichotomies of giant leaps from tradition to modernity, from old to new . . ."[106] Whereas the change has been rapid and dynamic, the culture does not portray such dichotomies, and utilizing terms such as globalized and modernized in research becomes much more tenuous. Modernity and globalization are often used in discussions of secularism. In

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[106] Brosius, Christiane. *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity.* London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010, 4. ProQuest Ebook Central.

research, “one of the central questions in the sociology of religion has been whether or not modernity (however defined) is characterized by pervasive secularization, and if so, why?”[107]

It is often hard to separate the notions of modern, western, and secular, because in so many cases they seem to be intertwined. Because of their interconnectedness, it is important, when talking about the religious changes associated with modern and metropolitan centers, to clarify how the word secular is being used in such contexts. “George Ostler in the Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines ‘Secular’ as pertaining to this world or the present life, not ecclesiastical, not found by the monastic views, ‘Secular’ can, therefore, be explained as ‘worldly,’ related to things connected with the present life only. ‘In the negative sense it implies dissociation from religion or religious teachings.’”[108] If cultures functioned on such clear-cut dichotomies, this definition would suffice the many uses of the word secular. However, religion is not separated from other parts of life in India. It plays an integral role in daily life and interactions. The use of the term secular in many discussions about Indian practices and politics reveals the ambiguity and difficulty in using the term without defining it contextually.

Politically, the word secular is often used to distinguish a nation state as being neutral to matters of religion, meaning that the government, ideally, is not legislatively attached to a religion or religions and is not overly influenced by a specific tradition. In contemporary India, the discussions surrounding ideas of secular vs. religious governments is a hotly debated and highly controversial subject that is beyond the scope of this paper. Political ideas of secular and

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[107] Eastwood, Jonathan, and Nikolas Prevalakis. “Nationalism, Religion, and Secularization: An Opportune Moment for Research.” *Review of Religious Research* 52, no. 1 (2010): 91.

[108] Chishti, S.M.A.W. “Secularism in India: An Overview." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 2 (2004): 183.

religious are naturally intertwined with the topics of this discussion, but the details of such connections will need to be examined in a separate study.

Many sociologists looking at spheres of religious practice define secularization as a "simple matter of declining 'religiosity,' generally understood in terms of church attendance, membership, and professed religious faith or identification in response to survey questions."[109] This method of defining secularization has a role in understanding general religious landscapes and adherence, but it is limited by its western, Eurocentric perspective and does not account for the fact that "secularization at the societal level is not reducible to secularization at the level of the individual."[110] This definition, by using membership numbers, identification, etc., is commonly associated with discussions of modernization because often with modernization and globalization comes observable ideological shifts in a society. A result of this shift is often not a negation of religion but a change in practice or identification with religious practice(s). Many people often assume that with modernization comes a secularization, similar to the definitions mentioned earlier. These definitions prove limited in understanding the nuances of change and religious expression that can happen simultaneously with modernization and globalization.

When discussing urban India, it is impossible to leave secularization out of the conversation because it is something being actively discussed between Indians at the political, religious, and societal levels. Therefore, Maya Warrier's definition of secular, inspired by Achin Vanaik, will be utilized for this study:

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[109] Eastwood and Prevalakis, "Nationalism, Religion, and Secularization," 92.

[110] Ibid., 92.

> [Secularization is] a process where religious affiliation comes increasingly to be seen not as a requirement, but as an option, 'one among a range of possible loyalties freely chosen and freely left,' and where ' . . . religious identities be[comes] increasingly accepted and respected.' This is a process where questions of religious identity take on an increasingly reflective character . . . .[111]

Warrier continues to discuss the ways this process of secularization is a straying from community-bound religious traditions to an individualized self-discovery and spirituality of personal choice.

As with any definition of multifaceted terms, Warrier's comes with its flaws — it does not address the continued importance of religious affiliation in many Indian communities or the undeniable prevalence of traditional religious organizations throughout the country. She also does not address that many who claim to be secular or non-religious do so with a belief that religion itself is backward and narrow-minded. At the same time, its usefulness is revealed in the fact that she developed it within a study of new religious movements in India of primarily urban, middle-class Indians. She also denoted the fact that secularization is a process that should be examined at the individual level and is not a clear-cut dichotomy of religious and non-religious thus becoming applicable to the current changes in Indian religious adherence and expression.

The changing perspectives of religion in urban middle-class India has been a growing topic of research in several academic fields over the past few decades. Although establishing a systematic categorization of the middle class is nearly impossible, scholars, using broad determinants, are interested in the steady and rapid rise of this demographic in urban India,

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[111] Warrier, Maya. "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission." *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2003): 213.

specifically its effects on politics, economics, and religious practice. With the rise of the middle class has also come the rise of different religious perspectives and adherences. One of the reasons for such dramatic change, according to Christiane Brosius, is an overall change in lifestyle:

> The dramatic speed at which India opened up to the world market and economic growth has also contributed to the production of new lifestyles that allow members of the middle classes to both adapt to this change in terms of mobility and flexibility and learn to perform and display the newly gained wealth and confidence. One of the most obvious 'testing grounds'. . . are the city, media, and religious practices. They are the arenas where new identities are contested, where desires, pleasures and anxieties are given a face, narrative and direction. . . . [112]

This mobility and identity contestation has been a major contributor to the religious changes in urban India, resulting in an attraction to Hindu nationalism as well as explorations in new religious expressions that center around individual spirituality as well as popular guru organizations.

Scholars have been actively searching for general themes explaining why the economic and globalization shifts have had such a dramatic effect on religious observance and affiliation, primarily in association with Hinduism.[113] Warrier has noted major themes coming out of this research: disconnection from traditional communal structures, lack of identity or association with

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[112] Brosius, *India's Middle Class,* 2.

[113] This line of research came center stage in the early '90s and is prominent in fields such as political science and economics. See works of scholars such as Arjun Appaduria, Carol A. Breckenridge, Sandria B. Frietag, T.N. Ninan, and Pavan K. Varma for more information about the rise of the middle class and the growing changes in economy and public life in India.

traditional belief systems and rituals, and difficulties adjusting to and negotiating with the rapid changes in the cities, resulting in new stress and anxiety. [114] Pyschoanalyst Sudhir Kakar elaborates on the lack of identity that many are experiencing as a result of modernization by claiming that the urban middle class is "somewhere between the vast traditional majority and a minuscule minority of the highly modernized which looks towards the West for all its models."[115] These feelings of disconnect and alienation are considered, by many, to be some of the driving forces behind the attraction to new religious movements and expressions, as well as the draw to non-religious ideologies and lifestyles.

In many ways, these themes center around lack of community connection and cultural identifications, and explain the changes of the religious spheres of urban India. These observations are seemingly easy explanations because they provide more clear cause-and-effect scenarios to account for cultural shifts. However, as with any culture, there are more nuances that need to be addressed to provide further understanding. Warrier's study on guru faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission reveals how the majority of studies addressing religion in urban middle classes, thus far, do not utilize ethnographic data to support their conclusions. This de-contextualizes much of the information and results in large generalizations. Warrier also sees that a significant reason behind these religious changes, specifically guru followings and other religious observances, cannot be accredited to filling a lack of identity or community but to the fact that people are more "concerned about the 'meaninglessness' of traditional faith and practice

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[114] Warrier, "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India," 222–223.

[115] Kakar, Sudhir. *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors,* (New York: Random House Inc., 1982) Kindle Edition, chap. 7.

as they had known them, and sought to replace these with what they claim is a more informed, meaningful and reflective approach to religion."[116]

Contrary to Warrier's conclusion that themes noted by previous scholars and her own research observations are at opposition, I believe they all play a part in the current religious changes. As noted, even defining the middle class of India is a gargantuan task that few have attempted, leading many to utilize generalized descriptions and categories. Therefore, utilizing a broad range of themes to explain the urban religious spheres and changes sheds light on the present diversity, without claiming any one or two explanations as correct or most applicable. Some people may change their religious affiliation because of a search for cultural identity or community connection. Others may seek a new sense of spirituality that is not tied to traditional patterns. Ultimately, it is important to remember that these themes are frameworks for understanding more distinct phenomena and practices and the element of individual choice is a growing impetus for religious diversity and change in the urban secularized and malleable spheres of India.

Kathak in the Urban Sphere

Throughout this study, the demographics of Kathak dancers of the dance's known history has been glossed over. As the dance form has gained prominence in recent times, the primary practitioners and audience members come from middle to upper class Hindu families. Exact research regarding the demographics of Kathak dancers has yet to be conducted, although most researchers of the dance form suggest that it remains in the middle to upper classes. Economic

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[116] Warrier, "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India," 230.

status is one factor contributing to Kathak's confinement to the higher classes of society, but the stress of a hereditary lineage of dancers at the turn of the century is the predominant reason Kathak has not migrated into multiple spheres of class.

Currently, with Kathak's growing international prestige and strong presence within diaspora communities, the demographics of performers are changing dramatically. Whereas, much research regarding dancers in the United States and the United Kingdom has been produced over the past few years, little examination of the demographic of Kathak practitioners in modern India has been conducted. Pallabi Chakravorty's research in *Bells of Change* opens the door for examination by noting how Kathak provides agency for women of different backgrounds.[117] As Kathak continues to expand its influence, it is important to question why Kathak attracts predominately middle-class women who are not part of the hereditary lineage, who are not responsible for the maintenance of tradition, and who continue the art for other reasons.

The urban middle classes of India constitute an ambiguous category that is hard to define by income, careers, etc., yet it is where we can find the majority of Kathak dancers. The dancers who have yet to rise to the status of an esteemed guru have been directly affected and influenced by the changes brought about by modernization, secularization, and globalization. Media, playing an integral role in so many of their lives, is shaping the way they view the world as well as their own cultural and religious heritage. These dancers are a part of the category of middle-class Indians who are possibly searching for ways to connect to community in the harshness of metropolitan cities. They may be seeking ways to maintain and connect to a culture that might

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[117] Chakravorty's book *Bells of Change* explores the role of women in Kathak in modern India, through various interviews and ethnographic research.

seem distant amidst the influx of western ideas and practices, especially in cities such as Mumbai and Delhi where Kathak is currently flourishing.

As noted in previous chapters, the religious history and connection to a larger tradition attracts many practitioners. The teaching of values and mythology is the impetus for many young dancers' integration into the art form. Many parents want to see their children connect to tradition while simultaneously learning art and a system of values. The continuation of this initial training comes as dancers find their place in a larger community of artists and as they find themselves connected to the dance at a deeper more spiritual level.

Connecting to community and tradition remain predominant themes in positioning Kathak as a religious ritual. Referencing the definition of ritual established in the introduction—ritual is a repeated act of expression by a group or individual that explores connection and communication with the sacred and a larger community. It fosters a position within a community, a set of traditions, and a system of values and worldviews, as well as a spiritual experience allowing "people to embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things."[118] This definition explains the attraction to community and religious tradition and also provides the caveat for an attraction outside of these spheres, including spiritual experience.

Warrier's definition also allows the idea that many practitioners of Kathak are not always looking to fill a lack of belonging in a religious community, but they are also making individual choices to explore spirituality. The following pages will be dedicated to outlining how Kathak is a religious ritual in urban India for both religious and non-religious practitioners. To summarize,

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[118] Warrier, "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India," 2.

it provides connection to community and to cultural and religious heritage, giving opportunity to explore individual spirituality through its experiential and devotional nature.

Many could claim and explain how Kathak dance is a ritual, without implying that it is religious. Yet Kathak is inseparable from religion. Even practitioners who claim to follow no religious tradition are actively engaged in a ritual that expresses a form of devotion. It could be argued that Kathak is only a form of artistic expression that has a religious history, but the religious and ritualistic elements are so engrained in the form that it is impossible to separate the two categories. As the dance has migrated into spheres of pop culture and as more adherents are claiming no religious affiliations, the devotional qualities still remain evident and integral.

From the *pranām* that signifies the beginning of a class or performance, to the portrayal of mythology, Kathak is actively engaged in a form of ritual expression. The *pranām* distinguishes the devotional elements of the dance by dedicating the practice symbolically to the god(s), the guru, and the audience. A dancer is capable of going through the motions of Kathak, but those who dedicate their time and energy are also actively engaged in learning and expressing the religious nature and history of the form, while opening themselves to a spiritual experience. According to Paul Connerton as quoted by Chakravorty, "if [ritual] ceremonies are to work for their participants, if they are to be persuasive to them, then those participants must not simply be cognitively competent to execute the performance; they must be habituated to the performance."[119]

The connection between spirituality and dance is a difficult line of phenomenological and ethnographic research because of the necessity of practitioner perspectives and the inability to

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[119] Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 112.

categorize and historicize individual experience. While the effect of movement on spirituality cannot be explained qualitatively, it is observable. Dancers in religious practices throughout the world are known to enter trance-like states as a result of movement. Even in post-modern dance forms, spirituality is not just explored in choreography, it is also something experienced by the dancer.

Aparna Ramaswamy, performer and psychotherapist, compared the experiences of a Bharatanatyam dancer and a contact improvisation dancer's accounts of their spiritual experience. The two dance styles stand in direct opposites in structure and intention, Bharatanatyam being strictly codified and contact improvisation functioning on grounds of mutual movement without set agendas, yet the dancers share similar experiences of spirituality and transcendence. Ramaswamy concludes in her analysis that "there is an emergence of co-created spiritual experiences in the confluence of the dancer and form of dance: experiences that are physically embodied as attunement, synchrony and harmony; and experiences that also manifest as subtle awareness, resonance and oneness."[120] Each dancer's threads of personal experience add to the fabric spiritual identification with dance, but the spirituality connected to movement and experienced by Kathak dancers, although difficult to connote, is something worthy of further research.

Kathak would belong in this field of further research, especially as its demographics continue to change and its influence grows. Dancers who devote themselves to the art do so because they are drawn in by an experience of spirituality associated with movement and the set practices that construct a Kathak learning experience and performance. Leading Kathak guru,

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[120] Ramaswamy, Aparna, and Daniel Deslauriers. "Dancer - Dance - Spirituality: A Phenomenological Exploration of Bharatha Natyam and Contact Improvisation." *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities* 1, no. 1 (2014): 117.

Bandana Sen, found this connection as a *Kṛṣṇa* devotee and directly worshipping her god with each movement. Other dancers find a spiritual connection in their direct interaction with movement, music, and breath, but not with a divine figure.[121] The list of various attractions to Kathak, and experiences therein, could be expounded in great detail with the accumulation of practitioner accounts. What can be gleaned by exploring the spirituality of dance, and Kathak specifically, is the understanding that Kathak serves the religious and spiritual needs and desires of its urban Indian adherents in a multiplicity of ways.

Conclusion

Using the working definition of ritual, Chapter One revealed that the construction of Kathak's history has been used to connect the dance to a specific system of values and traditions, providing a connection to a broader religious community and a set of ancient religious practices and identity. Chapter Two continued the discussion on how Kathak is connected to larger religious ideas, but expands it by looking at the dance's inherent spiritual qualities and its connection to a more diverse religious history than has been commonly accepted. Addressing the diversity and connection to other religious rituals brought the need to discuss the balance of tradition and change, through transmission, in Chapter Three, which opened the door for examining how the *guru-śiṣya parampará* has been integral in the maintenance of the Kathak tradition as well as enhancing its applicability and accessibility to a changing demographic of dancers and audiences. Concluding with a brief examination of the changes in urban Indian religiosity shows how Kathak not only fills the traditional needs of community oriented religious

[121] Accounts of Bandana Sen's connection to Kathak can be seen throughout Pallabi Chakravorty's book *Bells of Change.*

ritual, but it also satisfies an individual's exploration of spirituality and personal identification within or without a set religious tradition.

In conclusion, Kathak is a religious ritual that encompasses religious texts and teachings but goes beyond these categories in the way it connects practitioners to community, tradition, and a system of values, while providing a platform for spiritual experience for the dancer and audience. Kathak is aesthetically distinct, historically unique, diverse in demographic adherence, and religiously relevant by balancing tradition and change in the rapidly changing environments of urban India. Many traditions and rituals fade with time but Kathak remains—it responds to cultural shifts with innovation and relevancy and is kept alive by the devotees. Without the dancers' desire to keep the traditions alive, and their genuine connection to the dance, Kathak would have become merely a historical art long ago. However, the ringing of the bells in *riyāz* has not faded and the dance remains an active and relevant art in the religious spheres of urban India.

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